

May 2021

# Unleashing Autistic Talent

Submission to the *National Disability  
Employment Strategy*



## About Amaze

Amaze is a community organisation established over fifty years ago by autistic people and their families. We work to build community understanding of autism, influence policy change for autistic people and provide independent, credible information and resources to individuals, families, professionals, government and the wider community.

We are closely connected with the autistic community through our national help line Autism Connect, our peer support networks and community capacity building initiatives.

Amaze is *not a service* provider (for NDIS or otherwise). Amaze is a partner of the Australian Autism Alliance.

## About autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (or ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition. Autism is not a disease. People are born autistic. It is a lifelong condition and there is no cure, but the way it affects people may change over time as a person grows and matures. Every autistic individual is different.

Autism frequently co-occurs with other conditions including other neurodevelopment conditions (e.g. ADHD, Dyslexia) and Intellectual Disability. 50-70% of autistic people also have mental health conditions.

## Acknowledgements

Amaze extends its thanks and gratitude to members of the autism community whose insights and experiences have informed this submission – through both survey responses and in discussions with us. Direct quotes from members of our community have been included throughout this submission.

We draw heavily on the following surveys:

- **Autism and TAFE survey 2020** jointly conducted by Amaze, Asperger's Victoria, Different Journeys, the I CAN Network and Yellow Ladybugs to inform the Victorian Parliaments Inquiry into [TAFE and Disability Access](#)
- **The Autism Alliance Survey 2020:** Australia's largest and most comprehensive consultation survey of autistic people and their families and carers, with almost 4,000 responses received.
- **Amaze's Autistic Experiences and Community Attitudes surveys 2017** - [Australia-first research](#) into both the public attitudes towards autism, and the lived experiences of autistic people.

We also acknowledge the input of Amaze's staff (particularly our autism advisers), expert researchers, employment service providers, other autism and disability organisations.

## For further information

Amaze stands ready to assist in the development of the National Disability Employment Strategy. Nicole Rees, Deputy CEO and Executive Manager of Policy & Advocacy can be contacted at [Nicole.rees@amaze.org.au](mailto:Nicole.rees@amaze.org.au) to discuss this submission.



Shaping the future  
for Autism.

# Recommendations Summary

## Overarching recommendations

1. Include a specific focus on autistic people in the National Disability Employment Strategy.
2. Urgently establish an Autism Employment Taskforce to identify and build practical opportunities for autistic people to fill skills and labour gaps.
3. Establish targets and measures for improving employment outcomes for autistic people. Track and measure outcomes for autistic people and publicly report on these.

## Lifting employer engagement, capability and demand

4. Use demand-led approaches to enable autistic jobseekers to be employed in areas of skills and labour shortage.
5. Invest in demonstration projects in a range of sectors to strengthen the evidence base on effective employment models for autistic people, in areas beyond IT.
6. Promote and support the implementation of autism employment tools in different sectors and settings.
7. Increase employment opportunities in the public sector by:
  - Expanding autism specific employment initiatives in the public sector
  - Designating specific targets for employment of autistic job seekers within new Australian public sector disability employment targets.
8. Leverage public spending to deliver employment for people with disability by:
  - Using social procurement measures to require major contractors to the Australian Government to train and employ people with disability.
  - Introducing purchasing arrangement that preference social enterprises – including those hiring people with disability

## Building employment skills, experience and confidence of young people with disability

9. Ensure autistic young people have access to fit for purpose vocational exploration and work experience opportunities at school and in community and vocational training.
10. Pilot an Autism Inclusion Program in a range of TAFE settings.
11. Expand work-based training programs for autistic young people through place-based collaborations of TAFEs, employment service providers and industry partners.
12. Target the inclusion of autistic people in subsidised apprenticeships and traineeships.
13. Stream young autistic people into the Transition to Work program (rather than Jobactive or DES) so that they receive age-appropriate support. Strengthen the capability of Transition to Work providers, learning from key elements of the Ticket to Work model.

## Improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers

14. Review the effectiveness of the School Leavers Employment Support Program for autistic young people.
15. Prioritise development of autism specific employment initiatives in the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy. These need to be co-designed with autistic people and their representatives.
16. Address the disconnect between the NDIS and DES processes through clear protocols about the aims and roles of each service; flexibility to address participant needs; and workforce training.
17. Equip employment service providers with training in autism, and in autism employment tools.
18. Commission for collaborative approaches that facilitate the growth of good practice in the upcoming re-design of the DES system.
19. Enable autistic people to access DES support regardless of whether they receive a Centrelink payment.

## Changing community attitudes

20. Invest in a national public education campaign about inclusion of autistic people at work.

## Overview

Autistic people want to work, and they have capabilities and interests relevant to all types of jobs. Despite this, autistic people have long endured among the worst employment outcomes in Australia – much worse than people with disability more generally.

The covid recovery economy creates a unique opportunity to shift the employment paradigm for autistic people. Strong growth coupled with skills and labour shortages exacerbated by border restrictions create the imperative to unlock the capacity and capability of autistic people. We urge the Australian Government to use the National Disability Employment Strategy to seize this opportunity.

A range of factors have kept many autistic people out of work altogether. These things have also held many autistic people back in their careers. Importantly, these factors are largely not due to the ‘disability’ itself, but rather by the lack of an enabling and supportive environment.

Concerted attention to improving autistic employment outcomes is long overdue and has been lost in generic disability approaches of the past. We call for the NDES to include autism focused demand side, supply side and bridging (demand-led, supply sensitive) initiatives at both national and regional levels. There are promising initiatives to build on, and real opportunities to invest in innovations.

We also call for reforms of intersecting systems – mindful that an impactful NDES is closely inter-linked with the NDIS; education and training; procurement policy and employment services.

Major opportunities include:

- Urgently establishing an Autism Employment Taskforce to galvanise practical opportunities for autistic people to fill skills and labour gaps.
- Demand-led approaches and autism employment demonstration projects in a variety of high demand sectors.
- Promoting the wide-spread uptake of autism employment tools to strengthen understanding of how to best enable autistic people at work.
- Expanding work-based training programs and ensuring autistic people are equipped to take up subsidised apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities.
- Equipping NDIS and DES service providers to assist autistic jobseekers more effectively.
- Leveraging the Australian Government’s purchasing power to deliver employment outcomes for people with disability (e.g. through social procurement requirements on major contractors).
- Investing in public education as a foundational piece to changing attitudes.

More than ever, Australia needs to unleash its latent 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 productive capacity and community resilience.

# Setting the Context

## Autistic people want to work and have much to offer employers

Autistic people overwhelmingly want to work – our community repeatedly tell us this. The Australian Autism Alliance 2020 survey found that well over half of autistic people who are not currently employed want to be.<sup>1</sup>

Autistic people have much to contribute to Australia’s productive capacity, yet their talent and productive potential remains largely untapped.

There is strong evidence that autistic people can bring great strengths and capabilities to the workforce, and make skillful, 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>2</sup> Amaze’s 2017 survey revealed high levels of loyalty and consistency of autistic employers, with 45% of autistic people being in the same role for 5 or more years.<sup>3</sup>

Autistic people have capabilities and interests across the full range of vocations. The Autism and TAFE survey<sup>4</sup> showed autistic students study in a broad range of fields and have a diverse range of interests. Most popular areas include hospitality; community services (particularly autistic women); health (particularly women); building & construction; education; animal/equine studies and horticulture<sup>5</sup> - many of which align with Australia’s skills and labour shortage areas.

## Autism is a high prevalence, lifelong condition

Autism is among the biggest disability groups in Australia. Improved recognition of autism and the reclassification of Asperger’s Syndrome has contributed to a dramatic increase (217%) of people diagnosed with autism in Australia over the last decade. 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.

Based on the childhood diagnosis rates, actual prevalence in the community is likely to be around 3%, which means that *the vast majority of autistic adults* have not been formally diagnosed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jones et al, 2020, Australian Autism Alliance 2020 survey analysis, Australian Catholic University. 59.4% answered yes to this question, while only 16.3% answered no (the remainder were unsure or did not say). Discrimination and barriers to employment had caused some to stop looking for work.

<sup>2</sup> Harvard Business Review, 2017. *Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage*. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/AMZ\\_11134\\_2019\\_FACTSHEET\\_A4\\_6pp\\_FA\\_screen.pdf](https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/AMZ_11134_2019_FACTSHEET_A4_6pp_FA_screen.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Results of which are available in Amaze’s 2020 submission [TAFE and Disability Access](#)

<sup>5</sup> Amaze, Aspergers Victoria, Different Journeys, I CAN Network, Yellow Ladybugs, 2020. *TAFE Victoria and Autism Joint Survey*.

<sup>6</sup> Significant barriers to autism assessment and diagnosis include high costs (MBS Rebates cut out at age 13) and long wait lists

## Employment outcomes for autistic people are inexcusably poor

**Unemployment rates for autistic people are staggeringly high.** 2018 ABS figures revealed a 34.1% unemployment rate among autistic people - *more than three times the rate for all people with disability* and almost eight times the rate of people without disability.<sup>7</sup>

This comes off a **low base of labour force participation** of just 38% for autistic people, which is well below that of all people with disability (53.4%) and less than half that of people without disability (84.1%).<sup>8</sup> The proportion of autistic people in employment is just 27.3%.<sup>9</sup>

**Long-term joblessness is high.** More than half of unemployed autistic people who had previously held a paid job have been out of employment for three or more years.<sup>10</sup> More than half of unemployed autistic people in Australia (54%) had never held a paid job.<sup>11</sup>

**Under-employment is high.** More than half of employed autistic people (53.9%) would like to be working more hours than they do.<sup>12</sup>

**Under-utilisation of skills is widespread.** Many employed autistic people are seeking to better use their skills, with 45% reporting that their skills are higher than required in their current job.<sup>13</sup>

There is a high proportion of autistic people 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.”*  
Respondent, Australian Autism Alliance Survey 2020

**Poor translation of qualifications into employment.** A high proportion of autistic people 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<sup>14</sup> – which represents significant productive capacity that is going unutilised and a poor return on investment in tertiary education.

**Intersectionality amplifies disadvantage.** While we have not been able to access data on the employment status of autistic people from LGBTQI+ communities,<sup>15</sup> culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; First Nations; or those experiencing inter-generational disadvantage, anecdotally we understand outcomes are considerably worse for these cohorts.

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<sup>7</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=Summary&prodno=4430.0&issue=2018&num=&view=>

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Community Attitudes & Behaviours towards Autism and Experiences of Autistic People and their Families*, see [https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/AMZ\\_11134\\_2019\\_FACTSHEET\\_A4\\_6pp\\_FA\\_screen.pdf](https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/AMZ_11134_2019_FACTSHEET_A4_6pp_FA_screen.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</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\\_Report-FINAL\\_LR\\_R.pdf](https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/uploads/documents/Research/Autism_Spectrum_WE_BELONG_Research_Report-FINAL_LR_R.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Autistic people are six times more likely to identify as LGBTQI+ than the general community

## Educational attainment impacts employment outcomes

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.

## Poor employment outcomes negatively impact other areas of life

Poor employment outcomes negatively impact on other areas of life, culminating in very poor life outcomes for many autistic people.

- More than two-thirds of autistic adults (67.5%) report feeling **socially isolated**.<sup>16</sup>
- Autistic people have a **life expectancy of 20-36 years shorter** than the general population.<sup>17</sup>
- Between **50-70% of autistic people experience co-existing mental health conditions**. Anxiety and depressive disorders are the most prevalent, particularly among autistic females.

These dire outcomes come at a huge cost to autistic people, their families and the broader Australian community. They require urgent and dedicated action. Moving the dial on employment outcomes will lead to positive impacts in other life domains.

## Autistic people face a range of barriers of employment

Working-age respondents to the Australian Autism Alliance 2020 survey reported the following reasons for not being in paid employment (at the time of the survey). These challenges, together with corresponding enablers, are explored in the next part of this paper.

Main reasons for not having a paid job	Autistic adult [n=350]*		Parent/carer of autistic adult [n=268]*	
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%

<sup>16</sup> Jones et al, 2020, Australian Autism Alliance 2020 survey analysis, Australian Catholic University.

<sup>17</sup> Hirvikoski T et al 2015. *Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder*. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26541693/>; Guan J, Li G. *Injury mortality in individuals with autism*. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28323463/>

## Reform opportunities

### The National Disability Employment Strategy needs a dedicated focus on autism

There are powerful reasons for a dedicated focus on autism employment in the NDES:

- The considerable size of the autistic population in Australia (likely 3% of the population, with many adults undiagnosed)
- The appallingly poor employment outcomes for autistic people, which are considerably worse than for people with disability more generally
- The real potential to provide the right settings and supports that address the discreet challenges and enablers for autistic people in securing and sustaining employment
- The failure of generic disability responses to deliver outcomes for autistic people
- The opportunity to tap into the under-utilised skills and talents of the autistic population to help address Australia's current and emerging skills and labour shortages.

### Targets to drive improved outcomes for autistic jobseekers should be included in the NDES

The NDES ought to include specific and ambitious targets for autistic jobseekers covering a broad range of outcomes such as:

- Increasing the overall employment rate of autistic people
- Improving the skills utilisation rate of autistic people
- Increasing employment retention rates and positive employment experiences of autistic people
- Increasing the proportion of employers reporting they are confident in hiring and supporting autistic people

A detailed outcomes framework with measures to track progress across key indicators would enable critical insight into what is working (or not), highlight where attention is most needed, and inform decisions about the best use of resources.

### An Autism Employment Taskforce is needed

The COVID pandemic has produced unique economic conditions in Australia. For the time being, we are largely cut off from the opportunity to employ international labour. Australia's economic recovery is accompanied by growing skills and labour shortages, with government investments fuelling demand.

Australia will need to draw down on its local talent to an uncommon degree for the next year or two. A successful NDES would harness this opportunity to significantly shift the dial on employment outcomes for people with disability and build the foundations for sustained employment.

We call on the Australian Government to urgently convene an Autism Employment Taskforce, with the overarching goal to catalyse and connect autistic people with immediate opportunities. The Taskforce would identify, build on and replicate existing initiatives that are effective at bringing autistic people into employment. It would also initiate and monitor a range of demonstration projects aimed at placing jobseekers across the autism spectrum (including those with co-occurring intellectual disability) in areas of skills and labour shortage.



The Taskforce should bring together autistic representatives, key industry bodies, TAFE; employers (Autism CRC's Employer Community of Practice could be leveraged), employment service provider peak and government agencies (including DSS, DESE and the NDIA). It may require place-based working group/s for initiatives with a localised focus (which could potentially leverage existing place-based employment infrastructure).

#### **Recommendations**

- 1. Include a specific focus on autistic people in the National Disability Employment Strategy.**
- 2. Urgently establish an Autism Employment Taskforce to identify and build practical opportunities for autistic people to fill skills and labour gaps.**
- 3. Establish specific targets and measures for improving employment outcomes for autistic people. Track and measure outcomes for autistic people and publicly report on these.**

## NDES Priority Area 1: Lifting employer engagement, capability and demand

### Demand-led approaches to place autistic people into labour shortage areas: a win-win

We urge use of a demand-led (but supply sensitive) approach to placing autistic people into areas of skills and labour shortage. This represents a win-win. Such investment for mutual benefit positions inclusive employment not as a charitable act but as a means for sectors and employers to build local workforces.

Key elements include starting with industry/employer needs; preparing autistic jobseekers to meet these needs; and providing parallel support to both employer and recruit to enable a positive experience and sustained employment relationship.

The Autism Employment Taskforce (proposed above) could be instrumental in mobilising collaborations of industry/employers; TAFE; employment service providers and community supports into tangible projects.

### Demonstration projects in different sectors and for autistic people of all abilities are needed

There are some promising small-scale bespoke initiatives achieving success in the employment of autistic people – such as DXC Dandelion, Xceptional, Specialisterne’s<sup>18</sup> programs with a handful of public sector agencies and private employers (e.g. IBM, Westpac). These are largely IT focused, are of micro scale, and are few and far between. Much can be learnt from these for upscaling and adapting.

There is an urgent need for demonstration projects in sectors other than IT, given the diversity of talent and interest in the autistic community. Projects need to include autistic people of all abilities, including those with co-occurring intellectual disability. Little has been explored to-date in Australia,<sup>19</sup> but there are some promising international examples to learn from. Likewise, there are some innovative programs with other disability groups.<sup>20</sup>

#### Recommendation

4. Use demand-led approaches to enable autistic jobseekers to be employed in areas of skills and labour shortage.
5. Invest in demonstration projects in a range of sectors to strengthen the evidence base on effective employment models for autistic people, in areas beyond IT.

### Employers and employees need to be supported to introduce adjustments

Low knowledge of potential adjustments to enable autistic candidates and employees is a common experience.

Recruitment processes are one of the largest barriers to employment:

*“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*

<sup>18</sup> For more information, see Specialisterne Australia 2015. Submission to Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into services for people with ASD. Available at

[https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/fcdc/inquiries/58th/Autism/Submissions/S064\\_Specialisterne\\_Australia.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/fcdc/inquiries/58th/Autism/Submissions/S064_Specialisterne_Australia.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> An exception is Autism CRC's autism employment partnership with SunPork – animal husbandry

<sup>20</sup> Such as CVGT/Down Syndrome work, supported by Victorian Government funding

*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."*

Respondent, Australian Autism Alliance Survey 2020

Of the autistic adult respondents to the Australian Autism Alliance 2020 survey 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%). 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."*

Respondent, Australian Autism Alliance Survey 2020

*"I wish the mantra 'bring your whole self to work' applied to us. We're welcome as long as we act like everyone else."*

Respondent, Australian Autism Alliance Survey 2020

Much can be done to equip autistic people and employers around the effective use of workplace adjustments.

The overwhelming majority (70%) of Australians believe that employers should make adjustments for autistic employees. And 24% would expect to receive training if one of their colleagues was autistic.<sup>21</sup>

In our experience many employers are keen to know how best to support and enable autistic staff. This is consistent with research which has found that "the more employers knew and understood about autism, the more confident they were in approaching their employees to understand their unique workplace needs."<sup>22</sup>

There are a range of tools that exist to inform and support workplace adjustments.<sup>23</sup> A promising development is the Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST) soon to be released by the Autism Cooperative Research Centre. This evidence-based, comprehensive tool supports end-to-end recruitment processes for the recruitment, on-boarding and retention of autistic people. Pre-release testing found it effective in improving employers' self-efficacy and knowledge in modifying the work environment for autistic employees. The tool also equips autistic people to self-identify the adjustments that would help enable them.

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<sup>21</sup> *Community Attitudes & Behaviours towards Autism and Experiences of Autistic People and their Families*, see <https://www.amaze.org.au/creating-change/research/employment/>

<sup>22</sup> Scott, Melissa (2017), *The Integrated Employment Success Tool (IESTTM): Development and Trial of an Autism-Specific Workplace Tool to Assist Employers in Modifying the Work Environment* (PhD thesis), Curtin University.

<sup>23</sup> Earlier autism employment tips have been released by the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre and Amaze.

There is huge scope to systematically roll out this tool across different sectors and settings. The NDES can play a critical role in promoting and incentivising widespread operationalisation and implementation.

#### **Recommendation**

- 6. Promote and support the implementation of autism employment tools in different sectors and settings.**

### **Public sector disability employment targets should have an autism component**

Significant policy initiatives over the last few years are expanding employment opportunities for people with disability. In particular:

- Public sector employment. Nationally, there is a 7% employment target for people with disability across the Australian Public Service by 2025. By comparison, Victoria has public sector targets of 6%, rising to 12% by 2025.<sup>24</sup>
- Disability sector roles, in part driven by the NDIA and Partners in the Community, which carry 15% employment targets.

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), and federally within the DSS, that 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 (since recast as the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing) 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. The Department has since taken the lead in recruitment, on boarding 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.<sup>65</sup>

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

<sup>24</sup> 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>

To date, RISE has been a success. There has been high retention, with most autistic employees 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. The program has won a Tech Diversity award.

A stream for autistic trainees through the Youth Employment Scheme (YES) scheme is also being developed.

#### **Recommendation**

- 7.** Increase employment opportunities in the public sector by:
  - Expanding autism specific employment initiatives in the public sector
  - Designating targets for employment of autistic job seekers within new Australian public sector disability employment targets.

### **Social procurement could deliver employment dividends under the NDES**

Social procurement is a major lever that could be introduced by the Australian Government to turbo-charge the NDES. Leveraging the significant infrastructure investment, social procurement could bolster employment opportunities for marginalised jobseekers including people with disability.

Other than the Indigenous Opportunity Policy, the Australian Government has no social procurement measures attached to government purchasing and contracts with external providers.

With many successful social procurement examples to learn from in Australia and elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> we call for such measures to be included in the NDES. Purchasing arrangement that preference social enterprises – including those hiring people with disability – have also been introduced in some jurisdictions, and ought to be explored.

#### **Recommendation**

- 8.** Leverage public spending to deliver employment for people with disability by:
  - Using social procurement measures to require major contractors to the Australian Government to train and employ people with disability.
  - Introducing purchasing arrangement that preference social enterprises – including those hiring people with disability.

<sup>25</sup> Mupanemunda, M 2019, Social procurement: creating employment opportunities through purchasing expenditure, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

Mupanemunda, M 2020, Purchasing with purpose: tools to develop an organisational strategy for social procurement, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

Mupanemunda, M 2020, Councils as employers of choice: how hiring and procurement decisions can create employment for people with disability, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

The UK Social Value Act is available at

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/403748/Social\\_Value\\_Act\\_review\\_report\\_150212.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/403748/Social_Value_Act_review_report_150212.pdf), and the Victorian Industry Participation Policy at [https://localjobsfirst.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/25267/DEDJTR-VIPP-Annual-Report-2017-2018.pdf](https://localjobsfirst.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0022/25267/DEDJTR-VIPP-Annual-Report-2017-2018.pdf)

## NDES Priority Area 2: Building employment skills, experience and confidence of young people with disability

### Vocational exploration is critical for autistic young people

Limited exposure to the world of work during school and post-secondary study puts autistic people at a distinct disadvantage in finding employment when compared to others that have worked a range of student jobs, participated in work experience, work placements and internships.

Autistic students are less likely to combine study and employment than their neuro-typical peers.<sup>26</sup> They are also less likely to participate in work experience at school and in vocational education.

- The Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA) revealed a 23-percentage point discrepancy in job seeking (51% in the autistic group compared with 74% otherwise) among post-secondary students.
- Results in the TAFE and Autism Survey similarly reflected low rates of combining work and study. Just 20.4% reported combining study with employment – half of those were studying part-time. It also highlighted a range of barriers to participating in work placements.

We endorse the recommendation of the recent Shergold Review<sup>27</sup> 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.

Amaze's understanding is that very few autistic students, (or students with disability generally), participate in work-experience programs at school. Moreover, many autistic young people who leave school early and find themselves in other settings such as TAFE or community education are also often missing out on work-experience.

Purpose-built programs and tools exist, and ought to be widely available for autistic young people. For example:

- The **myWAY Employability app** is a resource launched by Autism CRC in mid 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.<sup>28</sup>

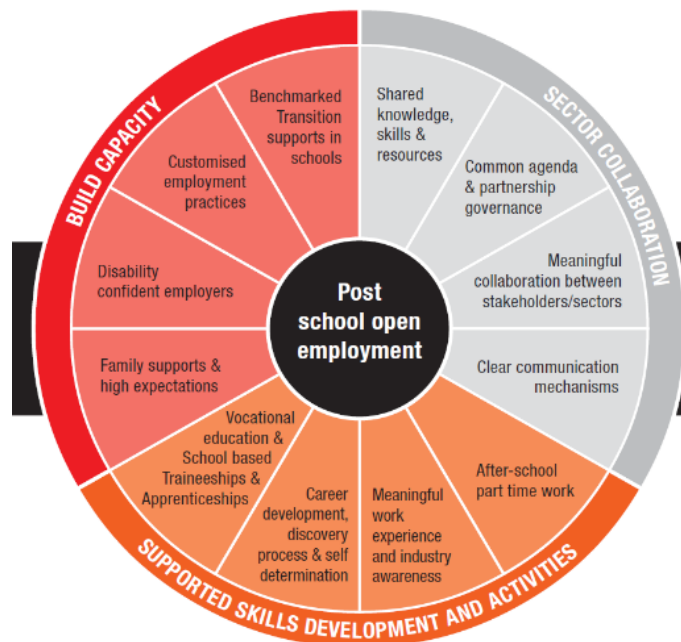
Autism CRC has ILC funding to promote this tool. We would like to see schools, TAFEs, universities and employment services embed it into their careers and employment exploration with autistic young people.

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<sup>26</sup> 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>

<sup>27</sup> 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>

<sup>28</sup> Information and links to resources are available at: [mywayemployability.com.au](http://mywayemployability.com.au)



**Ticket to Work** is demonstrating significant improvements in employment opportunities and outcomes for young people with disability,<sup>29</sup> including autistic young people and those with intellectual disability. 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. A federal parliamentary inquiry recommended expanding the Ticket to Work initiative.<sup>30</sup> This type of approach needs to be widely available for autistic young people.

## Recommendation

9. Ensure autistic young people have access to fit for purpose vocational exploration and work experience opportunities at school and in community and vocational training.

### Autism Inclusion at TAFE would be game changing

The vast majority of jobs growth is in occupations that require post-school qualifications (either VET or higher education).<sup>31</sup> Yet too many autistic people are not attaining the education and qualifications needed to support their economic participation.<sup>32</sup>

Amaze recently made a [comprehensive submission](#) to the Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability*. TAFE is the main post-secondary education pathway for autistic young people. While there are pockets of success, there is much opportunity to improve TAFE outcomes for autistic students.

Amaze called for the piloting of a dedicated autism program in a variety of TAFE Institutes. The pilot would bring together key enablers for autistic students, and provide end to end support from pre-enrolment outreach to post-course industry transitions. Evaluation of the pilot would enable continuous

<sup>29</sup> Information about Ticket to Work is available at: <https://tickettowork.org.au/>

<sup>30</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 2018, Unique individuals, broad skills: Inquiry into school to work transition. Available at: [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Education\\_and\\_Training/School\\_to\\_WorkTransition/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/School_to_WorkTransition/Report)

<sup>31</sup> Australian Government, 2018. *Australian Jobs Report*. Available at: <https://australianjobs.employment.gov.au/jobs-and-training/education-and-employment>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

improvements, measure outcomes, and test the feasibility of replication. The Australian Catholic University's program, below, could inform the design of the pilot.

***Australian Catholic University – helping autistic students reach their potential***

[ACU's Autism Inclusion Program](#) is a comprehensive offer that 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)
- Welcome pack for autistic students including resources and sensory items to assist with transition and demonstrate a sense of inclusion and connectedness (including welcome letter signed by the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Engagement who is herself autistic)
- Peer mentoring program, including ongoing PD for mentors
- Academic skills workshops
- Education Inclusion Plans
- Professional Development for teaching and administrative staff
- Autism acceptance and inclusion communications and events to raise awareness across university campuses (staff and students)
- Resource library
- Environmental audits and adjustments
- Low-sensory room on campus (Melbourne room opened, Ballarat room identified for refurbishment)
- Sensory maps (being developed by OT placement students)
- Social events (initially online due to Covid)

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.

**Recommendation**

**10. Pilot an Autism Inclusion Program in a range of TAFE settings.**



## Work-based training is an effective model for autistic people

Work-based learning – including through work placements, internships, traineeships, and apprenticeships - is a proven model for autistic people to translate training into employment.<sup>33, 34, 35</sup>

There are some promising examples of bespoke initiatives that combine in situ vocational training (and other support elements) where autistic people can apply their knowledge and skills.

TAFE could be at the heart of a considerable expansion of work-based learning models, with a dedicated offering of work placements, traineeships and apprenticeships for autistic students. Innovative approaches such as Holmesglen TAFE's Integrated Practical Placement program (below) could be replicated at scale.

### Homesglen Integrated Practical Placement (IPP) program

Homesglen TAFE's Integrated Practical Placement program provides structured learning through assisted work placements for young people with disability (majority are autistic) enrolled in Cert I Work Education. Students undertake their training while based at host industry partners in two sectors (Royal Children's Hospital, Royal Melbourne Hospital and Active Monash). On site assistance for both the student and industry partner is provided by TAFE staff and Disability Employment Service providers.

Results to date have been outstanding. 80% of graduates gained mainstream employment (compared to 35% without assistance).<sup>36</sup> Of these, 100% were still employed 6 months later.

The program is an Australian-first, Industry Collaboration Award [winner](#) and has been awarded ILC grant for a small expansion and longitudinal study.

Apprenticeships and traineeships work well for autistic people. The Federal Government's [Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements](#) subsidy program can help achieve the employment goals of autistic people. Amaze recommends that places are allocated to autistic young people. Assisted pathways into the program should be fostered at schools, TAFE's and DES providers.

### Recommendations

- 11. Expand work-based training programs for autistic young people through place-based collaborations of TAFE's, employment service providers and industry partners.**
- 12. Target the inclusion of autistic people in subsidised apprenticeships and traineeships.**

<sup>33</sup> Flower, R., et al. (2019). An alternative pathway to employment for autistic job-seekers: a case study of a training and assessment program targeted to autistic job candidates. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13636820.2019.1636846>

<sup>34</sup> Remington, A., and Pellicano, E. (2018). 'Sometimes you just need someone to take a chance on you.' *An internship programme for autistic graduates at Deutsche Bank, UK*. *Journal of Management and Organisation*. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-management-and-organization/article/sometimes-you-just-need-someone-to-take-a-chance-on-you-an-internship-programme-for-autistic-graduates-at-deutsche-bank-uk/60B2AF606ADA081C93E01EEC41BAE3A9>

<sup>35</sup> Nye-Lengerman, K. (2017). *Vocational rehabilitation service usage and outcomes for individuals with autism spectrum disorders* 41:39-50. Accessed at: <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S1750946717300880>

<sup>36</sup> White, Kiegaldie and Hunter, 2019. *The Integrated Practical Placement Program: a program of social inclusion in the workplace for young people with disability*, Homesglen Institute.

### **Autistic young people need youth-focussed employment support**

The TtW model is purpose build for young people, providing significantly enhanced opportunities for vocational exploration and capability building in a less punitive framework. As part of mainstreaming service provision for young people with disability, we call for TtW to be the default offering, unless a young person elects to instead go into (where eligible) the DES or Jobactive systems.

Refunding of the Transition to Work program in the 2021/22 budget, and it's upcoming recommissioning create the opportunity to incorporate design enhancements (e.g. inspired by the Ticket to Work program) to enable better autistic jobseekers.

#### **Recommendation**

- 13. Stream young autistic people into the Transition to Work program (rather than Jobactive or DES) so that they receive age-appropriate support. Strengthen the capability of Transition to Work providers, learning from key elements of the Ticket to Work model.**

## NDES Priority Area 3: Improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers

### NDIS employment supports for autistic people need to be overhauled

Autistic people comprise the largest diagnostic group in the NDIS. 31% of participants have a primary autism diagnosis, and an additional 5% of participants have autism as a secondary diagnosis. In the younger age groups, the lion's share of NDIS participants are autistic: 65% of those aged 7-14 years and 54% of 15-18 year olds.

The NDIS has a pivotal role to play in building the capability of autistic people to engage in education and training, and to secure and sustain work. We are eagerly awaiting the release of research commissioned by NDIA into autistic employment. Disaggregated data on employment outcomes or SLES for NDIA participants by disability group is not currently available but would be instructive.

The **School Leavers Employment Support (SLES)** program is available to young people in their last year of school (and sometimes the following year). From our community, we have heard mixed reports - perhaps reflecting the approach of different SLES providers. Identified shortcomings include:

- SLES commences too late in a student's school life
- It often does not provide the much-needed vocational exploration and work experience that autistic students frequently miss out on
- There is a lack of aspiration around student potential and prospects e.g. the program aims to prepare young people to transition into DES rather than link them into mainstream education, training and employment

The Australian Government has set a target of 30% of working age participants in meaningful employment by 2023<sup>37</sup>, up from the recently reported rate of 23%.<sup>38</sup> The most recent quarterly NDIA reporting reveals that just 14% of autistic participants have work related goals.<sup>39</sup>

The **NDIS Participant Employment Strategy** includes a commitment to develop and deliver specific responses to employment challenges for specific cohorts.<sup>40</sup> We understand this is to include a focus on autistic participants but has yet to be developed.

A recent study<sup>41</sup> identified significant room for improvement among NDIS workers to assist participants to build aspirations and actively prepare for work. It highlighted the need to better manage the interface between NDIS and DES noting a lack of understanding about how and when DES should assist jobseekers who are receiving support from the NDIS; and the need for flexibility in meeting participant needs rather than rigid and compliance focussed approaches. Training of the workforce to understand the needs of participants and the pathways to work was identified as a key element of improvement.

#### Recommendations

#### 14. Review the effectiveness of the School Leavers Employment Support Program for autistic young people.

<sup>37</sup> NDIA, Participant Employment Strategy (webpage), <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/strategies/participant-employment-strategy>

<sup>38</sup> NDIA, April 2021, *Quarterly Report to disability ministers 2020-21 Q3*.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

<sup>40</sup> NDIA, 2017, *NDIS Participant Employment Strategy*, p13.

<sup>41</sup> Melbourne Disability Institute and Brotherhood of St Laurence (August 2020), "Exploring the Interface of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Disability Employment Services", p15

**15. Prioritise development of autism specific employment initiatives in the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy. These need to be co-designed with autistic people and their representatives.**

**16. Address the disconnect between the NDIS and DES processes through clear protocols about the aims and roles of each service; flexibility to address participant needs and workforce training.**

### Employment services are struggling to meet the needs of autistic jobseekers

Autistic jobseekers are generally not faring well through the DES and Jobactive programs. Recent figures indicate there are almost 12,000 autistic jobseekers engaged with DES providers nationally,<sup>42</sup> although we expect this to be much higher given that most autistic adults are undiagnosed. DES have no requirements for training their staff in autism and achieve low rates of successful work placements for autistic jobseekers.<sup>43</sup>

The Australian Autism Alliance 2020 survey 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.”*

Respondent, Australian Autism Alliance Survey 2020

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

Respondent, Australian Autism Alliance Survey 2020

A recent study of the challenges encountered by NDIS participants accessing DES services reported: difficulties and delays in accessing a suitable DES; lack of attention to work readiness activities; placement in jobs without adequate support; and discontinuation of employment supports.<sup>44</sup>

Upskilling employment service providers in how to better meet the needs of autistic job seekers is pivotal to achieving outcomes at scale.

We know from our interactions with some DES providers that they actively want to build their autism competency, but that staff lack the training and tools to do so.

The competitive nature of the DES system works against collaboration and shared approaches, to the detriment of people with disability, employers, and the broader Australian community. The upcoming redesign of DES provides a change to commission for collaborative approaches to share and grow good practices.

<sup>42</sup> DES monthly data, 30 April 2021, available at the Labour Market Information Portal,

<https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/MonthlyData>

<sup>43</sup> Australian Government, 2017. *Disability employment services – Outcome rates by disability type*. Available

at: <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/DESOutcomeRatesbyDisabilityType>

<sup>44</sup> Melbourne Disability Institute and Brotherhood of St Laurence (August 2020), “Exploring the Interface of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Disability Employment Services”, p14 et al

## **Autistic people should be assisted by DES to find work regardless of Centrelink eligibility**

Significant changes to DES eligibility come into effect from 1 July 2021: jobseekers who can work 30 hours or more per week, or who do not receive income support or pension payments will no longer be able to access DES service.<sup>45</sup> This will almost certainly undermine the aims of the NDES. While those not on income support can technically register as a 'voluntary' jobseeker with Jobactive, the support is so light-touch that it will be wholly inadequate for someone facing barriers to employment.

### **Recommendations**

- 17. Equip employment service providers with training in autism, and in autism employment tools.**
- 18. Commission for collaborative approaches that facilitate the growth of good practice in the upcoming re-design of the DES system.**
- 19. Enable autistic people to access DES support regardless of whether they receive a Centrelink payment.**

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<sup>45</sup> National Disability Services, (2020), Government announces changes to DES eligibility: <https://www.nds.org.au/news/government-announces-changes-to-des-eligibility-from-1-july-2020#:~:text=From%201%20July%202021%2C%20job,employment%20services%20such%20as%20jobactive>.

## NDES Priority Area 4: Changing community attitudes

### If we can't change employer and public attitudes, nothing much else can change

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 autistic adult respondents to the Australian Autism Alliance 2020 survey 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 non-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)."*

Respondent, Australian Autism Alliance Survey 2020

Although there is widespread awareness of autism, there is a low level of understanding and very low knowledge and confidence about how to be supportive. Amaze's survey of community attitudes revealed that while 85% of Australians have personal connection with an autistic person, just 29% feel they understand how to support autistic people; and only 4% of autistic people and their families agree that people in the community know how to support them. One in five people would be concerned if an autistic person was appointed as their boss.<sup>46</sup>

As part of the Victorian Autism Plan, Amaze partnered with the Victorian Government in 2020 to develop a public awareness campaign '[Change Your Reactions](#).'<sup>47</sup> It included an advertisement featuring an office scene with an autistic staff member. The campaign aimed to inform, with the goal of encouraging more inclusive behaviours.<sup>48</sup> Evaluation results<sup>49</sup> are very strong with findings that 68% of people who saw the campaign reported having a better understanding of autism and 85% intended to refrain from being judgmental. One in five autistic people reported noticing a change in the way people treated them.

Change your Reactions is the first campaign of its type in Australia. There is a need for such an approach to be delivered nationally to both increase understanding of autism at work and inform the community how to better support autistic people. This corresponds with recommendations of the *Willing to Work Inquiry* which called for the development and delivery of a sustained, focused national community education and information campaign to lift awareness of the economic benefits of employing people

<sup>46</sup> Jones S et al., 2017. *Experiences of Autistic People and their Families*, Centre for Health and Social Research, Australian Catholic University.

<sup>47</sup> View the campaign at <https://changeyourreactions.com/>

<sup>48</sup> Victorian Government, 2019. *Victorian Autism Plan*. Available at:

[https://www.statedisabilityplan.vic.gov.au/application/files/5115/7543/9606/1805022\\_Victorian\\_Autism\\_Plan-WEB.pdf](https://www.statedisabilityplan.vic.gov.au/application/files/5115/7543/9606/1805022_Victorian_Autism_Plan-WEB.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> ARTD 2021, Publication forthcoming

with disability and to dispel myths and stereotypes to change the way we value the contributions of people with disability.”<sup>50</sup>

**Recommendation**

**20. Invest in a national public education campaign about inclusion of autistic people at work.**

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<sup>50</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016, *Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians and Australians with Disability*