

Universities Australia's submission to the National Autism Strategy

May 2024

Recommendations

Universities Australia recommends ongoing consultation with the sector to:

- contribute to the strategy's further development; and
- to ensure that its implementation is feasible and aligns with sector processes and reporting requirements.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development of a National Autism Strategy. Universities Australia (UA) is the peak national body representing Australia's comprehensive universities. Our interest in the consultation is from the perspective of the higher education sector, particularly: how universities can contribute to the strategy's success; and potential impacts of the strategy on the sector.

General comments

The strategy provides a framework for improving outcomes for Autistic people. Universities Australia supports the strategy's vision for a safe, inclusive society, where all Autistic people can fully participate in all aspects of life, including higher education. The [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#) similarly recommends improving the participation of historically under-represented groups¹.

We support the guiding principles and acknowledge that progress is needed within the four outcome areas of:

- social inclusion;
- economic inclusion;
- diagnosis, services and support; and
- health and mental health.

Implementation

The strategy currently includes little detail about implementation. It will be important to continue to consult closely with stakeholders, including education providers, given the potential operational and/or regulatory changes that may be required for it to be implemented.

¹ To ensure that all Australians regardless of background have the opportunity to go to university and no one is left behind, the Australian Government aspire to equal participation at university for under-represented groups, supported by needs-based funding for universities, more effective learning and teaching, and improved student income support.






Contribution of the university sector

UA acknowledges the contribution of the Autistic community to developing an evidence base about effective strategies to support those living with autism. Universities are also making valuable contributions in this area. They have been instrumental in producing data and in crafting best practice strategies and tools to improve the lived experience of Autistic people. The Australian higher education sector already hosts several centres² focusing on autism. In addition, Autism CRC³ – the world’s first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism across the lifespan – draws on the skills of researchers from across the higher education sector and partners with Australian universities on specific projects. Appropriately supported, universities are well placed to continue to contribute to improving the life outcomes of Autistic people.

The sector also educates and trains health, care, education, legal and other professionals. These professionals engage with Autistic people in significant aspects of their lives and play a pivotal role in ensuring they are treated with understanding and respect.

As the draft strategy notes, support needs for Autistic people may change, particularly around significant life transitions, such as those from school to university and university to work. The higher education sector understands the critical importance of these transitions and is already undertaking work to support these shifts. An outline of some of the strategies currently in place is provided below.

		
School to university	University	University to workplace
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NDIS Pre-planning Toolkit for people with disability entering Education and Training • Neurodivergent Hub • Inclusive medical education practices 	<p>For Autistic students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-campus community centre for Autistic adults • Students Mentoring Staff • Autism and related conditions mentoring • Specialist Peer Mentoring • Access and Inclusion • Strategic partnerships <p>For staff and students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADCET⁴ • Pre-service teacher training • Disability Awareness eLearning training • Accessible IT procurement in Higher Education Guide (CAUDIT) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability planning for employment • University Specialist Employment Partnership program (USEP) Toolkit • TALENT's Equity-first approach

² For example, the [Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre](#); the [Autism clinic - Brain and Mind Centre](#); the [Curtin Autism Research Group \(CARG\)](#); and the [Melbourne Disability Institute](#).

³ Previously known as the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism.

⁴ Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET). Initially funded through the Higher Education Disability Support Program (DSP) within the Higher Education Support (Other Grants) Guidelines 2022. funding ceased in 2023 when the National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) Program ceased.



The place of formal diagnosis

The draft strategy has highlighted that early identification and diagnosis leads to better educational, social and economic outcomes for Autistic people. However, a range of social and cost barriers prevent or delay Autistic adults from seeking a formal diagnosis. Current thinking suggests that an assessment of an individual's functional strengths and support needs is an effective substitute for diagnosis (noting that a diagnosis should include such an assessment). UA suggests that consideration is given to this approach within the strategy.

Summary

Universities Australia supports the draft National Autism Strategy's vision, goal, guiding principles, and commitments. The sector is well placed to provide evidence and information to the strategy's further development. **We recommend ongoing consultation with the sector both to contribute to the process and to ensure that its implementation is feasible and aligns with sector processes and reporting requirements.**