Executive Research Summary: The Dandelion Program

## Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre

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Disclaimer

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- Full references for all cited studies are available from Dr. Hedley.

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Overview

- People with autism experience the lowest labour force participation rates when compared to any other group

- The Dandelion Program is a supported employment program that provides employment opportunities to adults with autism

- There is a lack of research regarding long term benefits, effectiveness & outcomes of employment programs for people with autism

- This research primarily aims to understand and document the impact of participating in the Dandelion Program

- The goal is to build a scientific literature around the program, and the impact of transition to employment in people with autism more broadly

Figure 1 Labour force participation in Australia for people with ASD, people with a disability and the general population

Adults with ASD — 42%
Adults with disability — 53%
General population — 83%

Percentage (%)
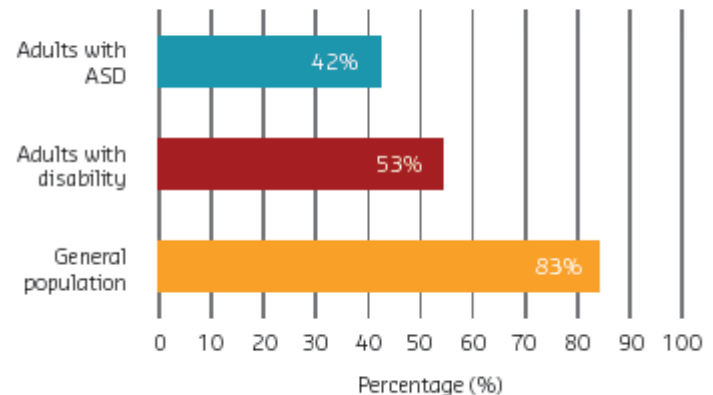
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Autism in Australia, 2012. Canberra: ABS, 2014.

Activities

- Longitudinal survey

  - Trainees, support staff, co-workers and family, as well as unsuccessful candidates complete an online questionnaire at 6 month intervals assessing quality of life, psychological health & well-being, job satisfaction

- Qualitative research

  - Individuals involved with the Dandelion Program are invited to participate in interviews or focus groups

- Economic evaluation

  - Development of model of economic impact of Dandelion Program

- Program development

  - Ad hoc consultation concerning development of Dandelion Program knowledge base (e.g., transition program)

  - Monthly consultation & meeting with Autism Spectrum Consultants

  - Development of assessment instruments (e.g., work performance)

Study 1: Systematic autism employment review

- This study, published in *Autism, the International Journal of Research and Practice*, systematically reviewed extant published literature concerning employment intervention and support programs for people with autism.

- Details

    - 58,134 studies on employment programs, interventions or including employment-related outcomes were identified and reviewed.

- Main findings

    - Studies were limited by poor participant characterisation, small sample size, lack of randomisation, failure to use appropriate controls.

    - Poor conceptualisation and measurement of outcome limited study quality and interpretation.

    - *Future research will require multidisciplinary & multifaceted approach to explore employment outcomes on the individual, family system, work colleagues; and impact of individual differences.*

Study 2: Transition to work

- This study, currently in press in *Autism, the International Journal of Research and Practice*, reports findings from focus groups from the SA DHS pod

- Details

  - 28 individuals (trainees, support staff, co-workers, family) from the SA DHS participated in focus groups approximately 6 months after implementation.

  - The aim was to understand the experience of transition to work, barriers, and factors promoting success at work.

- Main findings

  - Main identified themes included *Enablers, Challenges, Outcomes.*

  - *Enablers:* Organisational support, co-worker support, supportive leadership, environment modifications, ASC availability.

  - *Challenges:* Task difficulties, individual challenges, social problems, distraction, stress, communication difficulties associated with autism.

  - *Outcomes:* Generally positive, sense of purpose, independence, social relationships.

Study 3: Work experience & well-being

- This study, currently under review, reports findings from focus groups from the SA DHS pod (Study 1), and quantitative data from SA and QLD DHS pods (Study 2).

- Details

    - Study 1: This qualitative study examined challenges and mechanisms for supporting people with autism at work.

    - Study 2: This longitudinal, quantitative study examined the sustained impact of participating in the Dandelion Program on job satisfaction and quality of life.

- Main findings

    - *Study 1:* Four themes associated with work experiences and program implementation were identified: limitations in previous work experiences, pessimistic expectations, adapted.

    - *Study 2:* Results failed to identify a significant relationship between quality of life and job satisfaction; these measures showed relative stability over time.

Study 4: Bias & disclosure of MH conditions

- This study, a collaboration with Dr Simon Moss (Charles Darwin University), and published in *Equality, Diversity, & Inclusion,* explored workplace initiatives that could stem biases of recruiters against people who disclose diagnosed mental health conditions.

- Details

    - This is primarily a theoretical paper that analysed identified cognitive biases likely to deter people from employing people with mental health conditions.

- Main findings

    - When individuals are exposed to instability and flux in the strategies and operations of organizations, they often feel dissociated from the future.

    - When individuals experience a sense of dissociation from the future, they may be more susceptible to bias.

    - *Interventions that inspire individuals to develop expertise and capabilities, and that they can actively shape there lives, may help to reduce bias.*

Study 5: Loneliness & mental well-being

- This study, currently under review, examined mechanisms underlying high rates of depression and suicidal ideation in autism.

- Details

  - Cross-sectional data from people with autism from all Dandelion Program study sites, including unsuccessful applicants, were analysed.

  - *Loneliness*, depressive symptoms, and recent (last 2 weeks) suicidal ideation were characterised in the study sample.

- Main findings

  - 25% in range for clinical depression.

  - 20% reported recent suicidal ideation.

  - Loneliness had an indirect effect on suicidal ideation through depression – participants who reported being less lonely were less depressed, and participants who were less depressed were less likely to report suicidal ideation, however loneliness was not directly related to suicidal ideation.

  - *Interventions that provide opportunities for social inclusion may provide benefits for mental health and well-being, and may indirectly reduce risk associated with suicidal ideation or behaviour.*

Study 6: Social support & mental well-being

- This study, currently under review, also examined mechanisms underlying high rates of depression and suicidal ideation in autism.

- Details

    - Cross-sectional data from people with autism from all Dandelion Program study sites, including unsuccessful applicants, were analysed.

    - *Social support*, depressive symptoms, and recent (last 2 weeks) suicidal ideation were characterised in the study sample.

- Main findings

    - Social support, in the form of Appraisal (someone to share private worries) and Belonging (being invited to social activities), was not related to either depression or recent suicidal ideation.

    - Social support, in the form of Tangible (if I were sick, I could find someone to help me with chores) support, was related to depression, and had an indirect effect on suicidal ideation.

    - *Tangible social support may be a viable target for interventions and support programs targeting mental health and well-being, and may indirectly reduce risk associated with suicidal ideation or behaviour.*

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