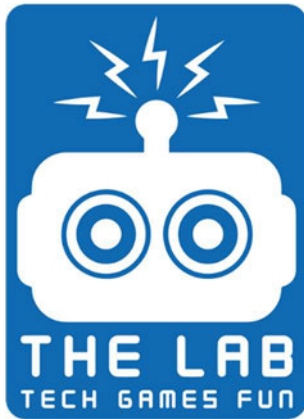


*Pre-Budget Submission
2021-2022*

The Lab Network

**10 years on,
The Lab Network is turning
Tech, Games & Fun
into meaningful careers
*for young people with autism***



The Lab Network operates Australia's world-first technology club for young people with autism.

The Lab engages and empowers young people on the autism spectrum through the most difficult transitions of their adolescence – from primary through to school-leaving age and further education.

Barriers, disadvantage and missed opportunities at these critical developmental stages can have persistent consequences throughout their lives. This is clearly evident in the shocking 2018 ABS statistics on education and employment outcomes for Australians with autism.

People with autism are four times less likely than others to complete a bachelor degree; and eight times more likely to be unemployed.

Across Australia there are now more than 30 community-based Labs, alongside The Lab Online, working with approximately 800 participants with autism aged 10 – 16 to improve their social, educational and employment outcomes. Labs are operated by individuals, disability service providers, local community organisations, local government organisations and Victorian Tech Schools. Demand has seen the number of community Labs double in the past two years and ten more Labs are already scheduled to launch in 2021.

The Lab Network is a registered charity which receives no government funding. Since the first Lab opened in Footscray Victoria in 2010, capital investments have been made possible by awards, grants and donations.

The Lab's tech-savvy, autism-informed mentoring service engages young people on the autism spectrum through their interests in technology (*Tech, Games, Fun*) in order to help develop both their social and technical (vocational) skills.

In our first pre-budget submission, the Lab Network calls on the Federal Government to fund *LabPRO*, a new vocational mentoring service and jobs network for young people with autism aged 16 - 25.

LabPRO is the natural extension to The Lab service model and aims to support more young people with autism to succeed in the transition from secondary education into further education, training and/or appropriate and meaningful employment.

How The Lab Network currently supports young people with autism

Although school-based early intervention services exist for younger children, few if any other programs in Australia enhance both the social and technical (vocational) skills of youth on the autism spectrum.

The mission of the Lab Network is to:

- empower local communities to start and sustain their own local Labs with governance and operational support from the Lab Network;
- positively impact the life prospects, social connectedness, wellbeing and skills (IT and social) of a group of young people who are severely disadvantaged. Although young people on the autism spectrum have considerable skills and potential, they suffer from isolation, disengagement and bullying leading to a distressingly low rate of workforce participation of 38% (ABS, 2018); and
- provide an informed and understanding support network for families and carers who often struggle in isolation with poor access to effective services.

Participants of The Lab attend weekly after-school 'Lab sessions' either in person or online, where tech-savvy mentors help them share their interests and develop skills in areas such as programming, team-based game development, video making and digital design. Community-based Labs are also important venues for parents to meet and share experiences and resources.

Recent Research

A decade of research and several thousand participants has created a strong evidence base for the transformative effect of the Lab's interest-based mentoring approach on participants' social skills, motivation to learn, engagement in education, self-efficacy and life ambitions. Participants and their parents have outlined a range of positive family health and wellbeing impacts.

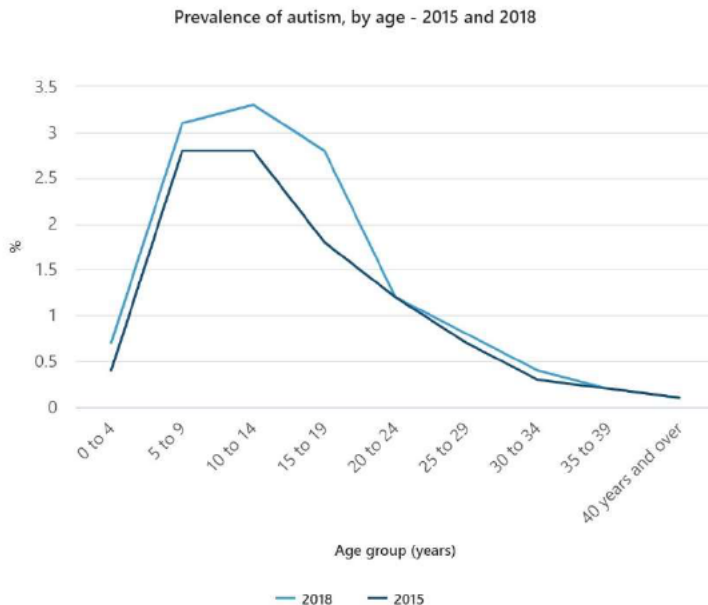
A recent doctoral study by Victoria University's Lye Ee Ng of three Melbourne-based local Labs, found:

"...The Lab enabled young people with autism to socialise by empowering them to build positive narratives and experiences around their autism and sociality...young people were able to create new knowledge about themselves and others...to learn that being autistic may not necessarily impede them the way medical narratives have described...the findings of this research provide a good case study for others to understand how young people with autism can perform beyond the perceived limitations of their disability." (Ng, 2019, p.304)

A 2019 research project by the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, *Charting the operation of The Lab: Technology clubs for autistic teens*, visited seven Victorian local Labs (five metropolitan and two regional) and found:

"The Lab is a safe space for autistic people. The Lab is a welcoming space, where participants can be themselves without judgement...The clubs appear to be beneficial with regard to improving social inclusion...Interactions between mentors and participants at all sites appeared less didactic (teacher to student) and more mutual (respected peer to peer)...working collaboratively to problem solve. It was evident that the sessions offered participants a chance to develop relationships that may assist with their life outside..."

About Lab Participants and Autism



In 2018 there were more than 60,000 young Australians aged 10 - 15 with autism and 50,000 aged 16 - 25 (ABS 2018)

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2018

Autism is a lifelong condition. It is not an intellectual disability but a developmental difference. Autism does not define a person's character or capacity. Autistic people share in a variety of characteristics which can lead to a diagnosis, including difficulties with communication, social interaction, sensory receptivity and repetitive patterns of interests or activities.

They can also share in a range of characteristics which are highly desirable to employers such as honesty, loyalty, persistence, logical reasoning, novel problem-solving approaches and deep expertise in areas of interest. That is provided they are afforded the opportunity to develop these skills in a welcoming and informed environment.

A word on terminology

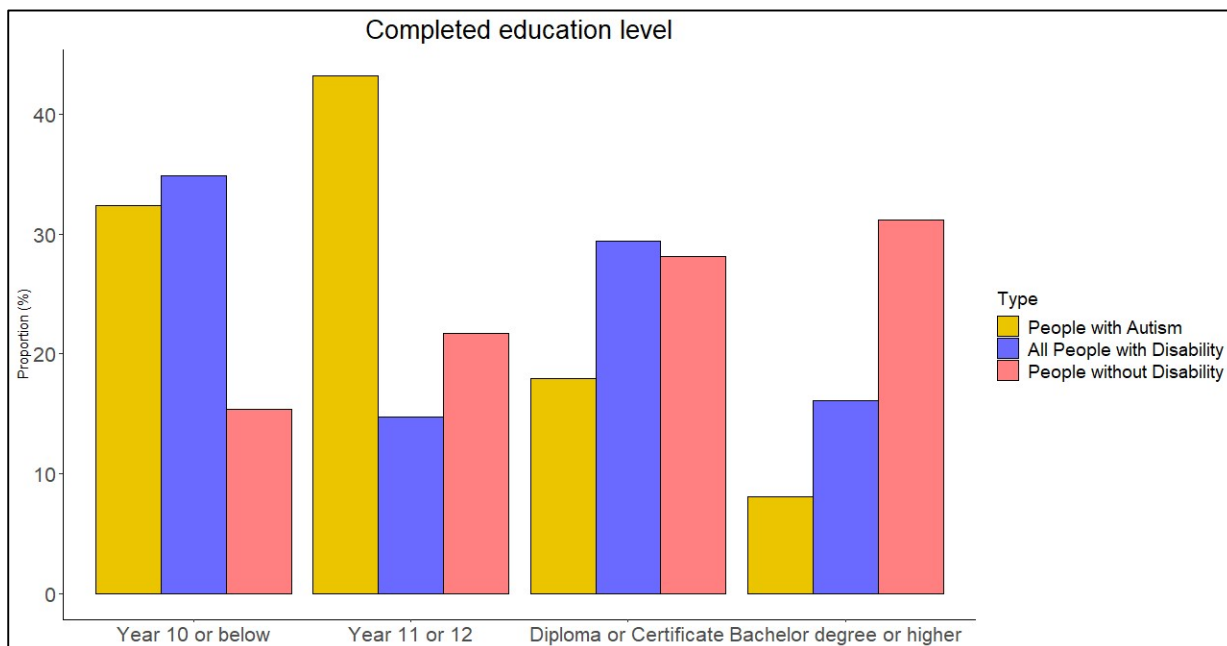
The Lab Network uses terminology that reflects the diversity of preferences among current Lab participants, their families and the broader communities in which they work. These preferences include the use of the terms: autistic people, people with autism, people on the autism spectrum, people with Asperger's Syndrome and people who are neurodiverse. The Lab Network does not use functional or ableist labels or the word 'disorder' in relation to autism.

Key Statistics, ABS 2018

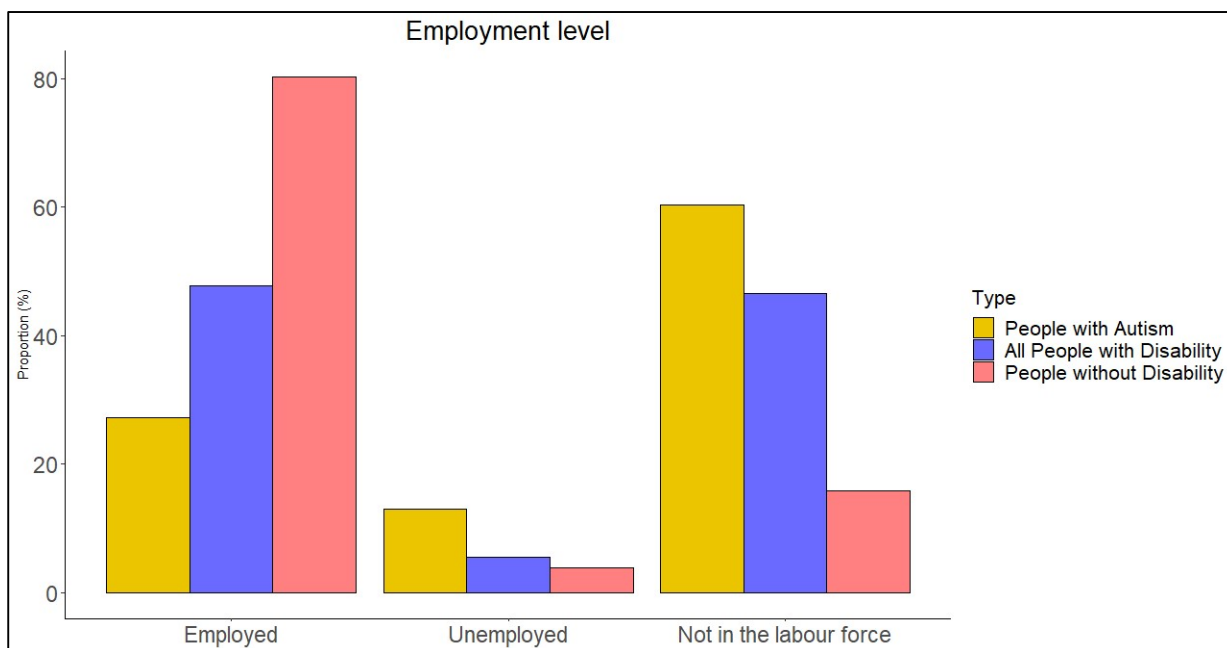
- In 2018 there were 205,200 Australians with autism, a 25.1% increase from 164,000 in 2015.
- There were more than 110,000 young Australians aged 10 - 25 with autism
- Males were 3.5 times more prevalent than females.
- The labour force participation rate among the 94,600 autistic people of working age (15-64 years) was 38.0%, compared to 53.4% of all working age people with disability and 84.1% of people without disability.
- The unemployment rate for people with autism was 34.1%; more than three times the rate for people with disability (10.3%) and almost eight times the rate of people without disability (4.6%).

Education & Employment

Due to their difference, young people on the autism spectrum typically suffer from isolation, bullying and disengagement, leading to a distressingly low rate of post-school education and workforce participation.



People with autism are four times less likely than others to complete a bachelor degree or higher educational qualification (8.1% vs 31.2%, ABS 2018).



In 2018 the unemployment rate for people with autism spectrum (34.1%), was almost eight times higher than for people without disability (4.6%).

2021 - Return to Growth for The Lab

Prior to the closure of all Labs in March 2020 due to COVID-19, approximately 800 young people with autism and an interest in IT, gaming or computers were attending weekly sessions at 32 local Labs run by individuals and local organisations including councils, Tech Schools and disability service providers.

Together with the Lab Online, they provided regular work for about 70 mentors, typically young women and men aged in their 20s and 30s either studying or employed in computer and technology-related fields.

To date, COVID-19 has cost the Lab Network three quarters (three school terms) of its annual revenue. In order to keep Lab participants supported and connected, the organisation expanded its online service to up to 10 sessions per week throughout 2020.

The Lab Network is now supporting local Labs and their mentors across the country to prepare to re-open at the start of the new school year in 2021 and remains committed to the continuing expansion of the national network. We are currently seeking relief funding in order to deliver planned growth initiatives for the national network of local Labs.

The Lab Network aims to increase sustainable access to Labs for young people with autism and their families wherever they live. Despite the impact of COVID 19, the target remains to have more than 2,000 young participants enrolled at local Labs within the next three years to 2023. The Lab Network aims to:



Start 50 new community-run Labs across Australia



Offer 15 Lab Online sessions per week



Recruit and train up to 150 new mentors



Recruit new participants and Lab 'organisers'



Invest in resources for the growing network

The Lab Network expresses its sincere gratitude to Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees as manager of The Lynne Quayle Charitable Trust for their ongoing support.

Turning Tech Games & Fun into Careers

The Lab Network is seeking funding to develop and launch *LabPRO*, the natural extension of our service to existing and new Lab participants aged 16 - 25.

For several years with key supporters and collaborators, the Lab Network has been developing the LabPRO service model, largely in direct response to demand from parents and participants.

With rising membership and awareness of our national network and specific approach to mentoring youth and young adults with autism, The Lab is in a unique position to engage participants, their parents, their communities and the industries in which they choose to work in responding to the challenges many will face as they reach school leaving age.

Although a few aligned support programs exist, the sector is immature and there are gaps in the quality of support, the range of opportunities and the volume they serve: there are nowhere near the number of opportunities required to expect improvement in education and employment outcomes.

From the outset LabPRO would be Australia's largest vocational program dedicated to young people with autism.

The LabPRO Model

LabPRO will continue the Lab's strengths-based approach which has been built around engaging young people through their areas of interest to support the development of their technical and social skills.

LabPRO will provide a supported vocational development pathway that initiates successful careers by helping to overcome obstacles and inequity and creating opportunities for meaningful work.

The LabPRO model will provide:

- ongoing interest-based individual and group mentoring, in-person and online for social / technical skills development
- ongoing social / peer network of fellow job seekers locally and online to overcome the isolation often experienced by young neurodiverse school leavers
- Online video-based specialised training modules on, for example, workplace culture, responsibilities and expectations
- subject-expert guest mentoring with peers, e.g. careers in IT, corporate HR representatives, preparing for work etc
- ongoing advice/collaboration with families/carers
- access to (LabPRO as a broker for) the LabPRO Vocational Network; an online portal for participants and in-kind contributors offering external opportunities such as:
 - external specialised/autism-informed vocational guidance and support
 - education and training advice
 - personal and professional development (writing a CV/resume, personal presentation and executive function / time management)
 - work experience, volunteering and other development opportunities
 - internships and employment with network partners and supporters.
- Ongoing support to participants throughout recruitment and training / workplace orientation.

LabPRO Mission

LabPRO provides a strength-based, self-paced, professional mentoring program and vocational support network for young Australians who identify as being neurodiverse or on the autism spectrum to support their transition from secondary education into further education, training and/or employment, with a focus on technology-related disciplines and creating opportunities for appropriate, meaningful careers.

LabPRO Vision

More young neurodiverse Australians can live equally meaningful and productive lives through equitable access to neurodiverse-informed social and vocational support, further education, employment opportunities and workplaces that embrace, accommodate and actively support inclusion and diversity.

The Sustainable Lab Approach

The Lab Network receives no government funding – it is entirely a not-for-profit run by a volunteer board to support local Labs to open and operate, in return for a small per-session 'management fee'. Local Labs charge modest fees to participants to pay mentors and cover their costs. An increasing number of participants, approximately 60%, have their local Lab fees funded by the NDIS.

The Lab Network designed the Local Lab Model to be self-sustaining. Local Labs can operate with participant fees as their sole source of income if necessary, with on-call support from the Lab Network. Local Labs use an online operations, administration, training and mentor resources system, built and maintained by the Lab Network with funding from awards and philanthropic grants, most significantly from Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees.

LabPRO will also be a mentoring-based, fee for service offering, which requires capital investment to achieve a sustainable operating model for local Labs to adopt. Fee for service components will be designed to meet existing funding criteria (for example, as set by the NDIS for achieving improved education and employment outcomes).

The value of the service will be positively transformed by in-kind contributions to the direct benefit of participants by external organisations – including service providers and employers – that choose to participate in the LabPRO vocational network. Contributors to the vocational network can engage directly with local Labs at the community level and nationally via the Lab Network, The Lab Online and the LabPRO portal.

Initially, LabPRO will focus on tech-based vocational interests; however, the program's mentoring approach to achieve 'job-readiness' would benefit participants with other vocational interests.

An independent expert evaluation at the conclusion of the proposed three-year development phase will lead to a comprehensive review of operations and outcomes, with recommendations for program innovation and investment for the following consolidation phase.

Like the proven local Lab model, LabPRO is designed to be scalable so that community-based organisations across the country can be supported to introduce and continue to grow the service sustainably over time.

Investing in LabPRO

The Lab Network is currently working with various supporters and partners to finalise a scalable and sustainable business model for LabPRO, including key partners the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC), the University of Melbourne, Clicks IT Recruitment and IBM Australia.

We acknowledge the contribution by the Commonwealth Bank Staff Community Grants Program which provided funding in 2017 - 2020 for the conceptual development and piloting of LabPRO in collaboration with several local Victorian Labs.

The modelling takes into account current Lab participants, of which approximately 25% are aged 16 - 18, i.e. the Lab currently has a stream of about 200 young people at school leaving age which, with the continuing growth of the local Lab network, is expected to reach 500 within three years.

With the launch of LabPRO for ages 16 – 25, we estimate that within three years there will be 1500 - 2000 LabPRO participants engaged with up to 80 community-based Labs, as well as The Lab Online and the LabPRO employment portal.

The following costs identify the capital investment required for implementation with up to 80 Labs across Australia, from launch in 2022 towards sustainability in 2024.

National management & administration (3 staff, 2 FT)	575,000
Rent, office costs	110,000
State coordinators x 3 (part-time, Years 2 & 3)	310,000
Marketing, media, recruitment & advertising - Organisers, mentors, participants & stakeholders (\$8k pm retainer x 30 months)	240,000
LabPro public website & network portal, dev. & maint.	75,000
LabPRO branding - copy, graphics, print production	8,000
Administration, CMS system	12,500
LabPRO Job Ready online core technical training modules	55,000
Online mentor learning modules production	35,000
Paid online mentor training - up to 150 mentors in groups	55,000
Organiser learning modules / manual	15,000
LabPRO state-based network events – 2 pa x Years 2 & 3 x 5 states	60,000
Interstate Travel & Accommm.	25,000
Local Travel & Accommm.	8,000
Insurance	9,000
Tutorial Library Maintenance	9000
Licences, software, online video	15,000
Autism advice, research & evaluation	120,000
	1,736,500

For the development and roll-out of LabPRO, a national community-based and online vocational support and employment network, the Lab Network requests \$1.74 million dollars over three years.

Return on investing in LabPRO

A strong evidence base highlights the importance of positive transitions between school, further education and work. Failure at any transition stage can make the next transition less likely to succeed.

All young people attempt the transition into further education and the workforce for the first time and face varied and complex barriers. Certain factors place individuals at high risk during transitions and the prospect of long-term unemployment or leaving the workforce permanently.

Young people with autism may face multiple major risk factors including: disability; low levels of education or skills; isolation from living in rural or remote areas; social isolation; family pressures and unstable or casual work.

LabPRO can provide strength-based vocational mentoring for participants, ongoing engagement with peers and a network of vocational opportunities to enhance the self-respect, esteem and ambition, financial independence and life choices of Lab participants with autism and in many instances their families.

As a scalable and sustainable national community-based service, LabPRO would help to address inequities of mainstream education and employment practices which see many young people with autism fall through the gaps, as is evident in education and employment outcomes.

Our focus on digital technology reflects the interests and the characteristic strengths of many of our participants. It is also one of the fastest growing parts of Australia's economy with a projected skills shortage of more than 150,000 technology workers in the next five years.

The investment sought to establish LabPRO as a national, community based vocational service would produce a cost saving if the service enabled just over 100 LabPRO participants to avoid unemployment for just one year.

That is, a positive ROI from just 10% of the minimum estimated number of LabPRO participants in its first full year of operation (2024).

With more than 50,000 young Australians with autism aged 16 – 25 and an unemployment rate at least eight times higher than people without disability, LabPRO can have a substantial social and economic impact by reducing participants' long term reliance on income support payments or the disability support pension, and/or funding for disability services, one of the biggest drivers of growth in both welfare expenses.