DARLENE MCLENNAN: I have the pleasure now of introducing Gemma Dodevska. I probably said that wrong, sorry, Gemma. We did practise this morning and I failed. Gemma is an early career researcher with an interest in supporting the independence and quality life for people with an intellectual disability and developmental disability. Gemma’s current projects relate to autism inclusion at the University of Melbourne, the experience of support and conflict within families of autistic children and young adults and the individualised support living of people with disabilities. I’m looking forward to this presentation, Gemma. I’ll hand over to you, thank you.

GEMMA DODEVSKA: Thanks again, Darlene. Can I just confirm it’s just my Powerpoint that you can see.

DARLENE: It’s certainly not the best. It’s kind of quite small but it’s okay. Did you want to just move through it and see if it moves. There you go, that’s better.

GEMMA DODEVSKA: Thank you. I join you all today from the Kulin nation and I would like to pay my respects to the elders both past and present and extend that respect to other Indigenous Australians present also. It’s great to be here today to share with you all the design of a project that led to the development of lower impact sensory spaces. The aim of the presentation today is to promote support that meets the diverse needs of individuals. Neurodiversity specifically was the focus of this project. However, we soon learnt that through the application of principles of universal design project outcomes were useful to other disadvantaged and marginalised groups of people. I’ll now jump to the next slide to provide an overview of the presentation. Today I’m going to present on the factors of the project that facilitated success, presented barriers and opportunities that arose. This, I hope, will provide you with some ideas how you might approach the planning and implementation of an innovative project. To do this I will provide you with an overview and background to the project. I will also then provide examples of how we navigated the complexities of the university system. I’ll also highlight the importance of building alliances and the invaluable contribution of place-based champions. I’m going to delve into more detail on the following slide. Until recently life outcomes of autistic adults has been an under-researched area and many people with autism experience sensory stimuli from the environment more intensely than the general population. In high education settings this can present as a big challenge as it can impact on a person’s ability to function and to navigate education and employment environments. So, if you can imagine a student who has sensory sensitivities and they have their first lecture at 9 o’clock in the morning and then in the afternoon they have to attend a tutorial where they have to participate in discussions with their peers. While waiting in between perhaps they need to study, have some lunch and also they need to engage in social interactions with other students. By the afternoon it’s not hard to imagine that people will be feeling really exhausted and even more sensitive to sensory stimuli. Perhaps it would be easier for the person to make their way back home for some much needed downtime but then that also may pose a risk that escaping the environment may mean that they decide not to return to the tutorial later that day. Another scenario could be that they do, they push through and they attend the tutorial but the person is so exhausted that perhaps their engagement in discussions isn’t to their potential. A third scenario would be that the person could make use of sensory supportive space, undertake some quiet study, self regulate and recharge which could then enable them to re-energise and continue on with their day. Each person is an individual and sensory sensitivity to sight, touch, taste, smell, sound or any combination of these are very real factors that can lead a person feeling highly anxious. As Merrin also mentioned in her presentation not all people choose to disclose their disability. What we know is that people in the autism spectrum have higher rates of drop-out, unemployment and under-employment compared with their peers who are not on the autism spectrum. However, as might be a popular conception, it’s not actually the autism itself that’s the causal factor of these poor outcomes, what we understand is that it’s mental health, sensory sensitivity and the ability to self regulate that are more important predictor variables that can impact on outcomes. Other factors that are perhaps less often thought of are the impact of temperature and sense of position and movement. I encourage you to think back to this slide when I’m talking about these factors and the development of the rooms as it’s not just the room itself but the systems that need to be in place to support the use of the rooms. On the next slide I will discuss examples of how we navigated the complexities of the university system. When an idea to develop low impact sensory supportive study spaces that promote equitable learning amongst tertiary students arose, Professor of Disability Inclusion, Keith McVilly supported the project. An important point that I would like to make here is that the idea originated from when an autistic person who was clearly listened to by Professor McVilly and Dr Susan Hayward. Dr Susan Hayward completed her Ph.D at the University of Melbourne under the supervision of Professor McVilly whereby she examined the experience of women on the autism spectrum in the workplace. I encourage you to look at her work as Susan’s work lies at the heart of this project. The initiation of the project was reliant on supportive organisational culture and the proposal was accepted and funded by the Student Services Amenities Fund at the University of Melbourne. When Susan was offered a Post-doc at another university I became engaged with the team to coordinate the project and I must tell you looking back it has been a long journey. There were many steps that we had to navigate to make the development of the rooms a reality. I must say that Professor McVilly’s leadership was a pivotal factor to its success. I really can’t emphasise enough the importance of the work and support of the people who became involved in the project at varying stages. The discussions that were held with all key stakeholders enabled the team to develop a robust project proposal that was presented to and approved by Project Services. Things that we needed to consider included how to make the spaces accessible whilst protecting people’s privacy and this included the naming conventions of the room. Now by engaging with a Project Officer. Anbin Hou from Spatial Analytics, we could update the app’s application which is a University of Melbourne navigation and wayfinding app. The app has accessibility features that enable a person to enter their starting point, select whether they would like to avoid stairs and then a destination point, a lot like Google Maps. This application also indicates where the nearest accessible toilet is located and many other features that need to be taken into consideration. So, back to the naming conventions, the rooms have a number, not a big name that says “Sensory Space”, so when a person who presents at Student Equity and Disability Support, Lee Papworth, and is considered to potentially benefit from the use of the rooms they are given instructions on how to book the rooms using their student ID number and the departments that are managing the rooms are notified. Details pertaining to why the person is using the room are not shared. The person can then find their way to the rooms using the online application and they can be shown to the room by university staff. The names of the rooms are shared on the website but the location is kept discreet. This is just one of the many examples of the discussion and the need for cooperation and collaboration across different departments and are required not to just develop the rooms but to ensure that people can access the rooms and use them in a safe manner and also to promote the sustainability of the use of the rooms going forward. The people who were pivotal in these discussions, Abby Grave, Nicky Haslinghouse, Andrea Hurt, Joyce Halwenge and Cate Macnamara. We also had input from Dr Matthew Harrison from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. David Staples from Infrastructure Services also played a big role in these discussions. You can see on my slide the facilitators, the barriers, the opportunities and environmental factors that were identified throughout the project and I have included the discussion about all of these throughout the presentation. We’re all pretty proud of how the rooms turned out. I’ll show you some of the photos on the next slide. Here are some of the photos of the three rooms that were developed. Once we had approval we worked with Project Services including Jon Peacock, Peter Nanscawen and Arthur Karanicolas to develop architectural drawings, obtain quotes and undertake the works. I’ll describe some of the features of the room. If you think back to my third slide that had images of the sensors. This can sort of help support some of the thinking of the considerations that have been made. Firstly, sight, where possible access to natural light is made available. Now you can’t see that very well in these photos but if you look at the bottom right image there are windows with blinds and lights with adjustable settings. While natural light is important so too is the ability to adjust the environment to suit individual needs. Does anyone here know someone who has migraines? There are times when complete light block-out is required where at other times it might need to be a dimmed light, so there are individual differences that are being considered between different people but also differences in individual needs at different times. I don’t have time to talk about all of the accessible features and the reasons for each but I will briefly list some. When we’re thinking about sight, thinking about adjustable lighting, natural finishings and the furnishings, the colour scheme. With the sounds there are acoustic blinds, acoustic wall panels, carpet, double glazed windows. Touch, there are tactile walls and where possible there is climate control. To sense a position of movement there are swivel chairs, navigation and wayfinding and sit/stand desks. These are also private spaces whereby people can feel safe to use their own personal sensory items if needed. From my personal experience conversations flow in these spaces. Again, the contribution of team members Baillieu law libraries and the Melbourne Graduate School of Education to find some rooms that are available to be renovated to be sensory supportive has been pivotal. Space is a premium at the University of Melbourne and not only that, a lot of the buildings while aesthetically pleasing, were built in a time when universal design was not a consideration, therefore another major hurdle that we needed to jump was to ensure that the wider building that houses the rooms adheres to principles of universal design. These are the first sensory supportive study spaces at the university and since this project another two have been developed. On the next slide I will talk the role of place-based champions. With the exception of Professor Tony Attwood and Dr Susan Hayward the people listed here are from different departments at the university. I have already mentioned a few people so I’m not going to repeat names, however I feel it’s important to take a moment to acknowledge the contributions that people made to the project and I’m sorry if I’ve missed anyone. Very importantly was the contribution that students with lived experience have made to the project and here I’d also like to highlight the work of Dr Matt Harrison. Without deep consultation we would not have been able to launch the project earlier this year so thanks to the work of Julie Anderson who supported the creation of accessible launch event. The launch event occured one week before we were all asked to leave the campus due to COVID-19 pandemic. We now have plans once the full return to campus occurs and people can use the rooms to undertake formal research and evaluation. I hope my presentation has given you some ideas and perhaps some inspiration. These projects take time and through deep consultation with place-based champions and students we were able to navigate the complexities and challenges of the university system and alliances. We now have plans to undertake formal research. I just have one final slide and I’d like to acknowledge Professor McVilly as the project lead. You have an email contact on the screen if you have any questions or feedback about this project or my presentation. Thank you again. DARLENE: That’s brilliant. Thank you so much, Gemma. That’s a wonderful presentation and huge food for thought. Currently at the university that I’m hosted by we’re looking at doing a number of new builds and this is a presentation I’ll be sending to all our architects and our transformation team. Has anybody got any questions that they would like to ask Gemma? Please put into the chat. On a side note please pass my love on to Keith McVilly. I worked with Keith probably 20 years ago, or probably even if I’d actually be truthful, probably 30 years ago, many years ago in Hobart in the disability services team there in the Department of Health and Community Services. It was great to see that he went on to research and has done some amazing work.

GEMMA DODEVSKA: Yes, I will.

DARLENE: We’ve got a question here, has this been done in connection with your university disability action plan or will it be added to your DAP?

GEMMA DODEVSKA: Yes, the action plan did – I’ll just go back to the strategy. The disability strategy did support this sort of work so I definitely from a strategic level need the systems and the university systems in place to enable such projects to go ahead.

DARLENE: Brilliant. How many rooms were you able to create and I know you said a little bit about funding but somebody has asked again about who funded these.

GEMMA DODEVSKA: Sure. We developed three rooms in total. There was one at the Baillieu library, one at the law library and one at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. The Melbourne Graduate School of Education that’s the first room there obviously and with the library rooms one of them, for example, the law library that was a really good space because it’s right in the middle of the university. It was identified that perhaps some people who have chronic fatigue might be able to use those spaces as they’re travelling across the university during their day.

DARLENE: That’s great. I love the colour palette. We’re being challenged by that at the moment. We’ve got one or two rooms that are fiery red that the architect seemed to like so we’re having to kind of renegotiate that. Gemma, did you have a final word?

GEMMA DODEVSKA: That was a big consideration. You also have to think about the undertones. A lot of people say green but there are undertones in there as well so there’s a lot of thought and being able to develop such rooms and recommendations that do feed back into the wider university systems is another step forward that perhaps maybe down the track we won’t get to fiery red rooms because it won’t be in the plans.

DARLENE: No. If anybody has got any other questions for Gemma – are you staying around for a little while?

GEMMA DODEVSKA: Yes, sure.

DARLENE: Just in the chat please, chat to Gemma and ask any questions you have in particular.