DEBBIE HINDLE: Welcome to our panel discussion on Autism Mentoring Program. So this session in the Pathways came about through our mentoring - autism mentoring community of practice. A group that started 2019. We were in a bit of a debate just a few minutes ago about did it start earlier in the year or later in the year but we know it was 2019. We feel that it’s been going for a couple of years. When we first put the call out, anyone who’s interested in joining a mentoring autism community of practice, we got way over a hundred responses. People were really keen and that community of practice has two aims. One aim is to support those who are actively involved in running and coordinating a mentoring program and also there are a lot of people of who also wanted information about how do you start a program, how do you get it off the ground, how do you garnish that support that you need to get that off the ground, and we thought one of the best ways of giving as many organisations and as many as people as possible that information was to host a bit of a panel at Pathways. So today we are so lucky to have four different people from a range of different mentoring programs around Australia – well, five actually. I think I'll start by introducing myself. My name is Debbie Hindle, for those of don't know me. I run the specialist peer mentoring program at the University of Tasmania, we call is Spearmint for short, and Spearmint has really taken on as an acronym. We support around about 25 students on the autism spectrum across our three campuses in Tasmania. I'm now going to get each of our panellist members to introduce themselves, tell us a little bit about their program. So, you know, how long it's been going for, how it's structured, how often people meet, and then after that we are going to go into a whole lot of different questions around about how do you establish a program, delivering the program evaluating it and then some of the key things people have learned along the way through that. Okay, Jasmine, I'll ask you to start by introducing yourself.

JASMINE: Hi everyone, my name is Jasmine McDonald, as you can see and I’m the Joint Program Manager of the Curtin University Specialist Mentoring Program, otherwise known as CSMP, and I share a full-time role with a Elaine Hatfield-White, who is a UK autism specialist. Elaine and I have both lived experience with autism and my own lived experience with my family led to my PhD research into how parents deal with the education of their children on the autism spectrum over time. Just in terms of the use of language, within what I say, I just want to indicate that I want to use certain words to talk about students on the spectrum, but just to acknowledge that many of our young people involved in our program do prefer specific terms and they're all different and they can include things like, autistic students, where they're loud and proud, or aspies and so on, so apologies if I offend anyone with some of the terminology that is used within my presentation. Also I just wanted to read my contribution because I wanted to ensure that my presentation was succinct and that I don't take up too much time from the other panel members. CSMP came about in response to long-term research indicating the poor academic employment and life outcomes of individuals on the autism spectrum, based on promising international autism mentoring research, CSMP was devised as a pilot program in 2014 and has been running for seven years. It is one of the first continuous peer-to-peer mentoring programs to exist in Australia and it’s probably the largest now with 80 mentees, 8-0 mentees on the autism spectrum, matched with 50 honours and postgraduate mentors who help them navigate university life more successfully. Mentors work cooperatively with their mentees to action their short, medium and long-term life goals with employment and academic goals being the main focus. Mentors provide opportunities for their mentees to develop and increase their independence, agency and confidence over time, in preparation for more success in the employment realm. CSMP is presently over-subscribed and under-resourced and because of this has had to be capped this year with a growing waiting list for 2021. In terms of the structure, mentors meet their mentees face-to-face or online weekly, attend weekly online supervision meetings and provide a fortnightly report for supervision purposes. CSMP also organises a weekly newsletter and oversees a weekly social group, Facebook page and discord group run mainly by the mentees that is supported by a couple of mentors on an as needs basis. The program has continued to develop based on mentor/mentee feedback with yearly surveys and multiple external evaluations conducted by the autism cooperative research centre, otherwise known as the Autism CRC. There is a much more detailed generic understanding of the structure of CSMP on the Autism CRC website with mentee/mentor and program manager information available to support other tertiary sites to set up and run their own mentoring programs and, yeah, I encourage everyone to visit that site because it's got a lot of very good information, as well as information on how we set up our program.

DEBBIE: Thanks, Jasmine.

JASMINE: Okay. Over to you, Debbie.

DEBBIE: Thank you so much, Jasmine, and thank you for that great, kind of, prelude about the terms we use around autism. So there is students with autism, there’s living on the spectrum or on the spectrum and then there's that loud and proud autistic or Asperger’s that's emerging. That’s so exciting. I’d also echo what you said about the resources on the CRC, and I know UTAS and Spearmint, the resources that were there about how to start a program, a mentor and a mentee booklet were invaluable. So if you’re thinking about setting up a program, I’d really advise you to check that out. And Katy, I know that your program borrowed from those resources too. So do you want to introduce yourself?

KATY: Definitely did. Hi everyone. I’m Katy Lambert. I'm from the University of Newcastle. So as Debbie just said, our program was adapted from the Curtin model. So we have paid mentors. We’ve been running the program for about four years, since the start of 2017. Our participant numbers tend to fluctuate a little bit throughout the year. The first year we had around 25 mentees and we’d recruited initially 30 mentors, but we had a few leave, some before it even started and some after due to changing availability and things like that. So we had about 25 mentors for about 25 mentees in the end. This year we have got between 45 to 50 mentees and we’ve got 21 mentors. So, yeah. We've kind of changed our program slightly in the last couple of years where all or mentors have at least two mentees, some have three. Yeah. So we have based our program a lot on the Curtin model. It really helped to us get started. So all the resources available would have take - I don't know if we would ever have been able to get it off the ground without all that support, so we are very appreciative of that being made available. Yeah.

DEBBIE: Thank you, Katy. Now, over to... and interesting to see that you've nearly doubled in numbers over the last year or so.

KATY: Yeah, it’s been – yeah.

DEBBIE: It’s amazing and I'm sure you will probably share some of the impact of that too later.

KATY: Yes.

DEBBIE: Charlotte, over to you and I know there at University of Southern Queensland you provide that different model and, you know, it’s all really important too when we’re considering setting up a program, to draw on the very different manifestos and models and approaches in that, so please share yours.

CHARLOTTE: Thank you, Debbie. Yes. At USQ we've gone down a different path to some of the universities. So our program is called A-Skills and we first rolled out in semester one 2014 and since then we’ve been moving to different iterations. In 2017 we won an open educational grant and we set up our A-Skills program to be online so that there will be openly licensed resources and we've since moved into that more online model since developing the online platform, purely because – well, for a few reasons, but mainly because we operate across three campuses. So organising that face-to-face, and we’re about an hour away from each campus, organising that face-to-face was tricky at times and also having things in a more online space meant that students who didn't access university, regardless of whether or not they lived at university, a lot of our students are online anyway, even if they're locally – geographically local students, it gave a lot more flexibility. So we operate online and we have – well, we don’t have face-to-face at the moment but we typically have face-to-face catch-ups, but all of course, they’re all via Zoom at the moment. The underpinning of our program was very based on self-determination theory. So the idea is we have complete choice for our students as they move through our materials. So we have core materials that are set up and things like understanding university structures and policy. We have different resources around advocacy and self-disclosure, and also around employment, looking after yourself, so there's lots of different pockets of information but there's no linearity to it. So students can dip in and out however they see fit. All of our materials were written collaboratively with our senior autistic students. So all of our mentors are senior autistic students. We don't have any of your typical mentors at all. They all identify as autistic and we operate as a group mentor. So we don't necessarily have one-on-one. We have person to several. So we operate on a group model. We've had lots of videos, lots of interviews and all of these were kind of co-created between our students, previous A-Skills students but also our facilitators. We pay all of our facilitators. So it’s around three hours per week during semester, semester three is a bit quieter for us so we have fewer students. It varies, how many students we have per offering. In semester two just gone we had 20, but what we found was that when we operated purely in a face-to-face we had to cap the numbers because we couldn't accommodate all the people who wanted to access all of our resources and turn up for sessions. Obviously online it's – that’s negated that problem. It’s less of an issue. So we will have students who will come to multiple different semesters, so there isn't that kind of impact on resources.

DEBBIE: Thanks. Can I just leave it there for now, Charlotte, is that okay?

CHARLOTTE: Yep, okay. Yep.

DEBBIE: And hopefully some of those other things you were about to say can be included in some of your responses.

CHARLOTTE: Sure.

DEBBIE: And over to Susan from ANU, and when I was first compiling the resource, how to transition to education, to tertiary education, a guide for people on the autism spectrum, and maybe Darlene can put the link into that too because it’s really useful, Susan was one of the first people that I contacted and was so inspired by their participation assistant model. So I want you to explain that now please.

SUSAN: Thank you, Debbie. So hello everyone. So, yes, I'm a disability advisor at Access and Inclusion at the ANU and the ANU provides a support transition program to first-year students on the autism spectrum, which we call the participation assistant program and it supports students who are transitioning to university studies by identifying some of the difficulties they may experience and providing a mentor or a go to person they meet with regularly to answer questions, troubleshoot any problems, help with organisation and planning, that sort of thing. The program has been going for about eight years, following a pilot program, which was run in 2012, with 12 students on the autism spectrum. So it’s a transitional program and the number of participants vary from semester to semester. Generally they’re not large numbers. We’ve had up to nine participants in semester one, being the start of the academic year and generally lower numbers in our second semester, being the mid-year intake. The participation assistants are employed between two to five hours a week and are paid a casual hourly rate with most participants only needing up to two hours a week support. The PAs meet with the mentee once or twice a week at a regular day and time and venue on campus, agreed to both by the mentor and the mentee, and since the move to online learning due to COVID, they have been meeting via Zoom and so the PA’s role in helping with the transition to university covers things like orientation to campus, university systems, including the IT and online systems, timetabling, keeping track of assessments, when to start revising for exams, assisting with liaising with professional and academic staff, but they don't provide academic assistance or counselling. The PA is required to complete an electronic journal/template each fortnight, which they email to Access and Inclusion and they submit their timesheets as well and the journals are reviewed by the mentee’s disability advisor, to determine whether any modification needs to happen, any particular follow up from identified issues or for further supports needed and we have an adviser, which is currently myself, that oversees the program by sourcing and maintaining a register of potential participation assistants.

DEBBIE: Okay. Thank you so much. So I hope you have all agreed that we have a really good variety of different approaches and models here. One question we are always asked in the community of practice when we talk about those of us who have a monitoring program, people want to know how is it funded, how do you pay for it. So just briefly I want each of you, and maybe I’ll start with you again, Jasmine, about how is your CMSP funded?

JASMINE: Well, prior to 2020, the additional support for students with disability, the ASSD funding model, was used whereby approximately 60 percent of the mentor’s salaries were claimed from the Federal government at the end of the university year. The university, however, needed to cover the program manager’s salaries and top up with the mentor salaries and the new 2020 funding model indicates that the bulk of funding will come from student numbers, identifying as having a disability or medical status, with funds available for staff training, modifications to course content delivery and for educational support, but at this stage we are all still wanting to find out how it will work. So that's what's happening our end.

DEBBIE: Watch this space. Yep. Okay. So before that it’s been a combination of that direct Federal government funding and some of the money that the university put in. Katy, what about Newcastle?

KATY: Ours is pretty much identical to Curtin. Ours is being funded in the same way by the university but a percentage of the mentor’s salaries are claimed back through ASSD. So we will be waiting to see how things pan out with the new model as well.

DEBBIE: Thank you. And Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE: Sorry. Initially ours responded very similarly through our student support, but we made a different choice to move out of our student support services and into our broader students’ portfolio. So we are funded under Meet-Up, so we operate like any other support group within our uni and they bid for money and were funded by - under the PBC student’s portfolio.

DEBBIE: Okay. Great. Mainstreamed it there. And Susan.

SUSAN: And, yes, so like the others with ANU, where the university funds it and also claims back through the ASD funding.

DEBBIE: And I can echo that’s what we do at UTAS as well and we too have paid mentors and pay for my part-time position. Okay. Now about establishing your program and I'm going to ask Susan, for you to start and just tell us briefly about how your mentoring program came about.

SUSAN: Okay. So how ours came about is that we had twin brothers with Asperger's syndrome that arrived at one of our residential halls on campus at the start of the year in 2011. They had flagged the year before that they would be registering with disability services and would be living in residence, but at the time we had no processes to assist students to adapt to university accommodation and the other usual – other than the usual welcomes at the residential colleges. The brothers had been living in another state and had not been away from home before. When they arrived they were given rooms next to each other and they were introduced to their senior resident. Within a week of their arrival, however, one of the twins began displaying high anxiety, in the form of crying, hiding in the computer room, screaming and generally not coping with the transition to the new environment and despite the head of the residence contacting the mother, the university was unable to develop strategies to manage the student’s behaviours. So during the initial weeks of their residence, senior staff worked with ANU support services and the family to implement various strategies to address the ongoing behaviours with limited success. After some time a plan of action was developed that included the employment of a participation system. This PA was to assist both students with their orientation to university, managing their anxieties about their academic work, their social adjustment and having someone reliable to contact who knew the ANU’s systems. In this case a third-year psychology student was employed, who was very enthusiastic to assist in this situation, to learn what she could and she was also quite a forthright person herself. A plan of action also included behavioural contracts that were developed in consultation with the twins and the brothers were also learning that they had to take responsibility for their own behaviour and that there was a set routine of who to call when they were experiencing anxiety. As part of the plan, meetings were conducted with other students in the residences to help develop awareness of how to support students, as well as strategies for maintaining – sorry, for managing appropriate behaviours and they were provided with contact details also of support staff. So that’s really how it came about in the first instance.

DEBBIE: And it sounds like it was packaged in a whole suite of different approaches and supports and goes back to how you first introduced that go to person, that participation systems become a go to person. Okay. And, Jasmine, do you want to talk about – sorry. I’ve skipped over. My fault. No, I was going to go to Katy. I thought what key challenges did you have when you were establishing your program and how did you overcome them?

KATY: Time was one of the key challenges when we were first getting started. We had, prior to this program, had an accessibility adviser who was working from a case management model for some students with autism, but the demand was really outstripping the capacity to provide the level of support that was needed. So we were looking for other ways to, kind of, meet those student needs and watch the Webinar on the Curtin program and thought, that’s it, that’s what we need, but it was also quite late in the year that we saw the Webinar and then got approval to implement the program. So we were really quite rushed at adapting documents and recruiting and training mentors at the start of 2017, but we did get there and – yeah. Once we got underway there was a few different challenges. We recruited from a number of degrees that had large placements because we decided to target degrees where we thought it’s relevant to their program of study to be working with people with autism. So we targeted psychology, social work, OT, education and speech pathology. So a lot of those programs have large placements and we didn’t really take that into account in that first semester. So we had a whole lot of OT students that had just started mentoring their mentees and then went off on a 10-week placement. So we’ve had a bit of trial and error, trying to work out how best to manage placements. So the first semester a lot of the mentees and mentors kind of worked out that they would keep in contact via phone or Skype. Unfortunately that didn’t work out too well that semester and none of the mentees kind of engaged with that contact, although I think we’ve seen a bit of a shift this year with COVID and lockdown and everyone using Zoom quite a lot more that there’s been quite a bit more engagement online this year than we’d seen in the past, but generally we allocate a different mentor to fill in while someone is on placement and we try to avoid allocating mentors to new mentees in a semester where they’re going to have a large placement now. So they were the kind of biggest challenges we faced in our first, kind of, semester or year of the program. As I mentioned before, we were so lucky to be able to access all the resources from the Curtin program and it was just a matter of adapting them to our environment, rather than starting from scratch, but it was still more time-consuming than we’d initially realised. So we were a bit rushed getting going but still had a really positive experience that first year.

DEBBIE: Thanks Katy. I'll just mention and invite people to put any questions in the Q&A area down the bottom. If you see in the bottom of your screen, in the middle there’s a Q&A. So put your questions in there and we are planning to have a bit of time at the end to answer any direct questions. Now, Charlotte, I'm interested in how you got the leaders on your side as you were establishing you’re A-Skills program, especially now that it seems it’s moved into, you know, being part of your core suite of deliveries. So how did you go about getting your leaders on side?

CHARLOTTE: I mean, it's always a challenge and I think it’s always really important to have a champion for these kinds of things. We do a lot of evaluation. We write a lot of reports. Each semester we talk about how many people engaged and how they engaged and what they engaged with, but we also – kind of autism research is a real, kind of, focus for USQ. So we leveraged on that. So I don’t sit in student support, I’m an academic, so I sit a little bit separately and we are a co-production research partner with Autism CRC and A-Skills forms a core part of that because everything we do in A-Skills is co-produced with our students and so we’ve really – as well as the kind of practical aspect of supporting our students through their learning journey, we’ve also really leveraged on it being a real research strength at USQ and your diversity is one of our themes in one of our research centres. So it’s something that really, kind of, packaged – you know, we packaged it in with our whole, kind of, research ethos. So that’s partly how we’ve managed to get and keep our leader onside by making sure it cuts across a few different areas.

DEBBIE: Yeah. Nice. And responds to what they're wanting and it’s well evaluated and evidence-based by the sounds of it. Jasmine, what was one of the biggest learning’s when you established your program at Curtin?

JASMINE: Well, I have to agree with Charlotte to getting high profile people involved with the concept and other external individuals who have influence and power in the institutions hierarchy so the program can be championed and more resources made available and growth will occur over time. CSMP presently has a patron, Professor Lyn Beasley AO, who is the former chief scientist and 2015 Western Australian of the year to help with this and we also have established relationships with Professor Tel Tan, who is the founder and director of the autism academy of software quality assurance. We have established relationships with Professor Sonya Girdler, who is the Director of the Autism CRC Program 3, adulthood, and she’s also the Director of the Curtin Autism Research Group and established a relationship with Professor Andrew Whitehouse, who is the Autism CRC National Research Strategy Director of the Telethon Kids Institute. So, yeah, having all of those big voices behind us and supporting us has made a big difference.

DEBBIE: Yeah. Thank you. And while I've got you unmuted, can you just share with us a bit of a fairly typical mentor/mentee session?

JASMINE: Well, we recommend a strength-based student-centred approach where mentees and mentors work out a written agenda, prior to their weekly meeting, based loosely around the mentee short, medium and long-term goals, with an emphasis on their academic and employment needs. There’s an understanding by the mentors that if other more pressing and stressful issues arise, the mental health of the mentee must take priority and the meetings are highly individualised to address the idiosyncratic needs and wants of each mentee and we recommend the exploration of both neurodiverse and neurotypical solutions to difficulties that arise and, for example, if a student expresses a need to improve their presentation skills, often a difficulty for many of our mentees, the mentoring session may be dedicated to unpacking and practising these skills and also approaching the social group, which is mainly run by the mentees, so that they can be used as a test audience to gain advice and feedback regarding some of the neurodiverse ways that students address these difficulties that they experience.

DEBBIE: Yeah. I really love that. That's really picking up on that neurodiversity, isn’t it? It’s rather than just kind of giving those skills to be the same as everyone else’s, celebrating and seeing what you need to adapt and adjust.

JASMINE: I think those shared solutions are very important and, you know, as was spoken about by Charlotte, I think ramping up the mentee voice is extremely important for gaining that confidence, that agency, that ability to navigate the system eventually on their own. So, yeah, highly agree with that way of operating.

DEBBIE: Yep. Thanks Jasmine. Charlotte then, can you tell us how you recruit your mentors who are people on the spectrum, who are students on the spectrum? So how do you go about recruiting?

CHARLOTTE: So we - because we operate on a – more of a group basis, rather than an individual basis. We don’t need as many mentors, which obviously makes recruitment and payment much more straight forward. The first time we ran the program, some of the people – some of our students who completed the first iteration of the program, they became our mentors and we’ve kind of operated on that basis ever since. The current mentor, he’s actually one of my PhD students. So, you know, we’re always looking for senior students who have survived the undergrad, who can kind of, you know, relate to the challenges that mainly undergrads have. We don’t only have undergrads, by the way, we do have some Masters students. So recruitment is less of an issue for us and we always have a study pipeline, as it were, coming through. So when my PhD student graduates or doesn’t want to do A-Skills anymore, there’s always new students who have gone through the A-Skills program who have created materials for us who are keen to be involved.

DEBBIE: Who are ready to step up? Thank you. Now, Katy, you shared with us before one of the challenges of setting up was kind of finding those right mentors who weren’t going to disappear off into placements. So can you tell us what does work well for you in the recruitment of your mentors?

KATY: I thought I was talking about recruitment of mentees.

DEBBIE: Yes, mentees.

KATY: Yes.

DEBBIE: Sorry.

KATY: That’s all right.

DEBBIE: But you could also throw in anything about mentors.

KATY: Happy... happy to talk about either. Happy to talk about either. I'll quickly talk about how we recruit our mentors and then go on to mentees. So we recruit our mentors through our jobs on campus program through our careers service. We target specific programs, as I’ve mentioned before, where it’s relevant to their program. We generally recruit undergrad students because we, kind of, really focused on it being that peers, who are kind of at the same kind of level of their study. So we tend to target second and third-year students, so we hope to have them for a little while and we, kind of, do individual interviews because of that – the importance we see in that one-on-one, kind of, interaction because of the mentoring is done one-on-one and so far it seems to have worked really well. We’ve got some amazing mentors. So we’ve been really lucky and – yeah. I think it helps also with their employability because it is relevant to their program, so the mentors are generally quite enthusiastic and wanting to learn and wanting to do well and – yeah.

DEBBIE: In fact we did a – sorry. And there’s an ADCET webinar that people can download where we have mentors talking about the value to them.

KATY: Yeah.

DEBBIE: About being involved in the program. So briefly tell us then how you recruit your mentees.

KATY: So our mentees are just recruited at our initial appointments with them, when they’re registering with accessibility. We talk about the program to pretty much any student with an autism spectrum diagnosis, how it works, ask if they think it’s something that might be helpful and whether they were interested. We found really early on that if we just gave them the intake paperwork to complete at home, we often never heard from them. So now we tend to make a follow-up appointment a week later and give them the paperwork, say complete what you can and then we can finish it off next week and that way we’re more likely to get that done and get them a mentor fairly quickly, so yeah, that’s basically how we recruit mentees.

DEBBIE: Thank you. Susan, can you tell us about how expectations and boundaries are set within your program? They’re things that can get blurry and muddy and when they get blurry and muddy it’s very difficult.

SUSAN: Yes. That’s exactly right. So the disability adviser meets with – with each participation assistant in person. So when we’re sourcing our PAs, we meet with them individually, just telling them about the program, you know, making – the requirements are really clear. We meet with them before introducing them to the student, to make it clear what kind of issues that particular student might have and the particular assistance they might need and also just going through the role, you know, quite, you know, step-by-step. So that it’s the physical orientation, helping the student with time management, that organisation and planning, assisting with issues around adjustment to accommodation, that it – and it doesn’t involve that academic assistance or counselling even and it doesn’t really necessary require a great understanding of the disability but what the feedback has been is that it’s really having an understanding of the university systems and how to navigate those systems and the culture at university, you know, and the social requirements there. So a regular day and time is agreed between the mentor and the mentee as well. What we developed is also some guidelines, some written guidelines, which have the do’s and don’ts, covering the expectations as well. So it really clearly outlines the both the participation assistant, as to what their expectations are and what they’re required to assist, but also for the mentee as well, like other expectations from them, you know, turning up on time, that they’ll agree to some goals that they’re going to work with the participation assistant as well, keeping a record of the things that they’re learning. So – and out of that also what was developed is after that initial orientation where the main things were covered, the participation assistants were saying, I’m not really sure where to go when I’ve covered the basics. So we developed a list of questions or open-ended questions that they can use to go more deeper with the mentee as well. So... and just really clear guidelines as to how that contact might be. So, for example, with the pilot program, you know, the twins were texting several times a day to the participation assistant. So, you know, some boundaries around how often they can make contact. So, you know, if they’re finding lots of things that they need to ask, so putting that together, although they might email the participation assistant and the PA will collate that in and so they’ll go through that in the next catch-up. So, yeah, we found that that’s a really important part of the program.

DEBBIE: Thanks. And those fact sheets – or the Q&A’s sound really helpful, so I wouldn’t even mind a copy of those, if you want to send them through later, that would be great and some other people might want them too. Katy, I’m just going to ask you, who and what do you evaluate, because we've heard that evaluation - or how and what do you evaluate because we've heard that evaluation is a really important part of selling to the leaders?

KATY: Sorry. I was muted. Yeah. So we’ve done a few different things over the years. We’ve done online surveys of both mentors and mentees, we’ve run focus groups, as well as bringing in some people external to the program to interview some of the mentees and, kind of get some more feedback that way. We've looked at things like getting stats on progression and completion but we found that to be quite problematic because it's such a small sample size, the data can get really easily skewed by things that aren't, kind of, related to the program, like a student’s family deciding they're all moving interstate or, you know, a death in the family or something else happening can - the data can get really skewed off to look like it's not having an impact so we've kind of steered away from that sort of data a little bit. We've also got an OT honours student, who is going to be completing her honours research project on the program, which we’re really, really excited about it. So she’s just getting started. So watch this space. We’ll hopefully have a really solid research project to share in the future as well.

DEBBIE: Thank you. And, Jasmine, I know that Curtin has done a lot of evaluation and in conjunction with the CRC on your program. So overall what does the research indicate from your mentors, the feedback from your mentors? What's that indicating?

JASMINE: Well, the - the autism, as you have said, the Autism CRC have undertaken a number of mixed method evaluations of CSMP from multiple perspectives, inclusive of the mentors, and those research articles are available on the Autism CRC website. In terms of our yearly surveys, we have had feedback from our mentors indicating that they have been highly satisfied with the program and recommended it to other students in their study area and that's how we have gained a lot of our mentors over the years from one year to the next and we have had feedback from them saying it's really increased their own development, their skill level and understanding of this population of students. That they have found their experience provided excellent professional practice, especially those students in the health science areas. They appreciated the support and supervision the program managers gave them, especially when critical incidents occurred. They found the training highly useful, especially for mentors with little previous experience in the autism space and they appreciated learning from other mentors and the program managers about their mentoring practice during supervision and they also appreciated the weekly newsletter that we write that encapsulated current necessary information about the program and highlighted employment opportunities that could be used as a basis for some mentoring sessions.

DEBBIE: So there’s just so many benefits and value there to the mentors. Charlotte, what's your evaluations found from your mentees? What’s that indicating about their experiences?

CHARLOTTE: So we do different types of evaluations. So we evaluate every session weekly. We get them just to do a poll so we can get a sense of what's important and what's not at that time. We’ve also done the bigger program evaluations and I agree, Katy, honours students are fabulous for doing a nice rigorous evaluation and look at the program. I think what’s interesting for us is the sessions that are generally the most valued by our mentees are the ones where we bring in a guest speaker. So sometimes we bring in academics, so that they can – you know, a friendly academic and the students can ask the academic, how would we approach you to ask for an extension, you know, how would that work, what does the policy look like. We've also had successful autistic business owners that have come in and talked about how they managed to move from uni to something that's quite concrete. So it's kind of those sessions that we tend to see the most value reported from our students, but interestingly the other value end is the one that we don’t do any scaffolding on, which is just that opportunity just to meet up and just hang out as a community. We get a lot of positive feedback from enabling that or facilitating those kinds of spaces, just for our students just to hang out. So a real mixture of some very structured invited speakers, but also just some opportunities just to be.

DEBBIE: Cool. Thank you. Before we go to the next question, Jasmine, I'll just circle back to you. Lyndel wants to know a bit more about the content in your weekly newsletters.

JASMINE: Well, what I normally do is rather than keep on piling the emails into the mentee and the mentor’s inboxes, I generally pull all of the information that I think they will be wanting to know about, including employment opportunities, with regard to what’s happening at the university. So, you know, if there is, say, a careers expo, then we might organise a group to be going to the careers expo and we’ll put that into the newsletter. We’ll also include group programs that are available in the counselling section of our university. Anything that I am distributing information about that I think the mentees and the mentors would find of use and they can use that as a basis for going through prior to their mentee/mentor sessions and they can pull out appropriate information and go through it with their mentees and discuss it.

DEBBIE: Sounds a great way to encourage linking into other parts of the uni, what’s happening.

JASMINE: Yep.

DEBBIE: Okay. We might - time is going – I said time would go really quickly, wouldn't it? Can – Katy actually, I might get you to start and share what you are doing to raise awareness of autism or the spectrum with staff within the University of Newcastle? You’re muted. That’s our great Australian salute. You’re on mute.

KATY: Sorry about that. So this is something we are really excited about because we are currently in the process of developing some training for staff and perhaps some students as well to participate in around autism and the impacts and the strengths and all the really positive things around autism. We were looking at a way to kind of make the university more inclusive, create more understanding, and also have something available that the people with autism didn't have to do anything. So they don't have to participate in a program, or because there's a lot of students that aren't participating in the mentor program and aren't keen to do that, so we came up with the idea of doing a training program based on the model that the allied network uses. So we are going to do the training and then have the option of joining the neurodiversity network and then the people on campus that are like an ally to people who are neurodiverse, so they will be given a pin that they can either attach to their lanyard or shirt or hat or bag whatever, so there identifiable as a person who has done some training, has some understanding and is really open to communicating and working with or just having a chat with someone who is on the spectrum, so more approachable and - yeah. So we are kind of still in the process of developing that. We’ve done a focus group with some of our students and got some feedback on what they think is important to include in the training. We’ve had really positive feedback about the idea for the program. The students that we have communicated with have, kind of, all indicated that they felt like it would make it easier to approach someone if they saw them wearing that pin. So, yeah, we’re really excited about it.

DEBBIE: We’re watching this space. We’re watching this space.

KATY: Yes.

DEBBIE: I might ask Susan too – sorry, Katy.

KATY: That’s all right.

DEBBIE: I’ll just ask Susan, if there's any initiatives that you have done or professional development to increase that confidence awareness and understanding of the autism spectrum.

SUSAN: So we did have Tony Atwood come out, who is a well-known expert in ASD, to facilitate two workshops on campus. We had about 160 professional staff and 100 academic staff participating in the training across the university in separate sessions. So that was the main thing that we had so far and just, you know, we're now looking at in the future what we can do moving forward. More informally we attend college internal training, both academic and professional staff providing – and it’s part of the more broader training in disability and the implementation of access plans where we include that knowledge as well.

DEBBIE: Okay. Thanks. Before we go with some of the questions that we’ve set, I just want to respond to Liz Shanley and Liz raises a really important point and one that’s often raised in our community of practice. Liz firstly says, “This is really great and it seems that this type of program works well in a university environment, where the students are enrolled in their programs over a number of years. Do you think the mentor program could be adapted to the TAFE or VET environment, where students are only often enrolled for a term or a semester for each study program or course?” Does one of you want to respond to that? Jasmine, thanks. Sorry. Jasmine and then maybe Susan you can add something.

JASMINE: This question has come up beforehand and one suggestion that I had was that maybe the TAFE could link in with the tertiary institution where they do have health science students, who in their undergraduate years, I know in psychology a lot of them don't have professional practice and they are very interested in getting that level of professional practice underway, prior to ending their undergraduate studies. So it might be worthwhile having a chat to somebody in a university environment who runs a psychology program, who might be interested in doing a partnership whereby they could look at using some of their undergraduate students, their honours students perhaps, who might be interested in becoming mentors for TAFE students on the spectrum.

DEBBIE: Thank you. And someone has raised the point that TAFE can't pay mentors, which is one consideration, but really it's interesting the students that we recruit, and I went down the road of paying our mentors, just because we pay so many other student leadership positions within our university and I didn't want ours to be less considered or poorer cousin or not valued for the work that they were doing, which is equally important, if not more complex and rewarding than some of the other roles, but some of the mentors say they would do it anyway, regardless of the money. So it’s an enriching them. So you may be able to establish those kind of pathways because it’s easy to sell the business case. It is a win win. Susan were you going to comment also on that?

SUSAN: I guess I would just add to that, that you could just start as a transitional program, you know, and – yeah. And I find the same, many said they’d do it anyway as a volunteer, so whether it’s through their student unions or wherever they can tap in, you know, that way through a, sort of, volunteer-type program to start with and start in a transitional way and then can build from there.

DEBBIE: Yep. Thank you. Jasmine, do you want to share any initiatives or programs that you are doing to increase the confidence, awareness and knowledge of staff at Curtin?

JASMINE: Well, I just want to acknowledge the work that Elaine Hatfield-White, who is my joint CSMP manager has done in this space. She’s developed an autism awareness staff training Initiative that she has generously shared with Curtin, other university staff and is via the autism mentoring community of practice meeting that Debbie, our panel facilitator, first began, so thanks to Debbie for that. And I know that she did allow the community of practice to have her PowerPoint presentation, so if anyone is interested in utilising that, I know that Elaine would be very happy to share it. And also during her presentation, I think it’s being recorded for Curtin’s use, she always has students on the spectrum involved in our program as part of her presentation because she feels that that inside out perspective is so valuable and I so agree with that with regard to that. And it’s interesting how a all of staff members, when they hear students on the spectrum speak from the heart, that it becomes a lot real for them. So including them as part of the presentation, I think, is imperative and very powerful.

DEBBIE: I agree. It was really powerful having the students there as part of that. I’m just also going to answer one of Lyndel’s other questions and that was about the difference between coaching and mentoring, which is a really interesting question and I was involved in doing some podcasting the other week with some of the world leading coaches and they talk about, there’s not that much of a difference but you can think of mentoring as having some expert advice that you’re sharing with others, so being a bit of an expert in the field and from my perspective, you know, our mentors are experts at being students, that’s why we employ them. It’s not something that a staff person could do because our students are the experts at finding their way around the learning management systems, how to negotiate extensions, how to juggle jobs, different priorities. So we’re employing them and recognising them for that and that’s what they’re sharing with their mentee and they’re doing that using a coaching methodology, we hope, which is tapping into the resources, the assets and the strengths of the person that they’re supporting. I don’t know if anyone wants to quickly add something to that but that’s my strong perspective. Yep. We’ve got some nods there. We have got in our last five minutes, I’m going to ask each of you to just share – just finish off by sharing maybe one thing that you’d do differently, if you could do a rerun, and something that you’re really proud of, you know, one thing that really touches your heart about your mentoring program and I’m going to ask Charlotte to start this off. So one thing you’d do differently if you did a rerun and then one thing that really touches your heart that you’re very proud of.

CHARLOTTE: Okay. So I think one thing that we could do differently, if we could have a rerun, is just like Jasmine was saying earlier, get champions onboard earlier on. It helps with obviously finance. It also helps with getting the word out. I would say also – you know, I’m a nice rebellious academic, so get yourself a nice rebellious academic onboard because we’re more than happy to disseminate things through channels that are not necessarily, kind of, standard ones and I think the other thing we would do is not have it so closely tied with needing, kind of, an initial identification as a particular label. When we moved away from student support it meant that we could have students who were self-identified, when there was a lot of barriers for an official diagnosis. So we would make that move to be more inclusive, I guess, within the autistic community much earlier on.

DEBBIE: Thanks. I’ll ask you now to share something that you’re really proud of.

CHARLOTTE: Yep. And the thing that we’re really proud of is that it is completely co-produced with our autistic students. So it’s something that took a long time to happen but it’s really what is perceived to be important from our autism community at USQ, rather than what academics or what anyone else thinks are important.

DEBBIE HINDLE: Thank you. Thank you. Awesome. Great way for you to finish, Charlotte, and contribute to your program. Susan.

SUSAN: Yeah. Look, likewise with Charlotte, just to get some champions onboard. I’d love to have a dedicated project officer just to take on, like, this running as a program like, you know, sourcing the PAs and the recruitment process. It takes quite a bit of time as an adviser, so having some champions with that would be amazing. And I guess what we’re really proud of is we’ve had students just exit the program early. Saying that, you know, they’ve got some fantastic support and so exiting out of the program earlier. I had one participation assistant who – the experience was so positive for her that when she graduated from her degree, she enrolled the role so much she applied for and was successful in obtaining employment in a disability support role. So that wasn’t, sort of, part of the plan but she just loved it so much. So, yeah, that was a really lovely outcome.

DEBBIE: Awesome. Thank you, Susan, that sounds great and that’s the positive, isn’t it, proud of where we see our mentors as well as the achievements of our mentees. Katy.

KATY: Yeah. So I think we’re just getting to the point of starting to have some champions, or we’ve just started to have some more academic involvement, so that’s a bit exciting. One of the things that we’d probably do differently is we made a switch to fortnightly meetings from 2018, as the program was growing and there was concern about the costs of this and being able to sustain this growth. While some of our mentees have been fine with this change, I do believe that it’s reduced the effectiveness of the program somewhat. So I’d, kind of, look at other options before that but we still, kind of, feel like that’s a better option than limiting the time in the program for mentees or capping the numbers.

DEBBIE: And quickly – quickly one thing you’re proud of and then we’ll hand over.

KATY: For me I’m really proud to be involved in something that’s so proactive because in accessibility a lot of our time is spent, kind of, in this reactive space where we’re trying to put out all these spot fires and get to things. Yeah.

DEBBIE: Thank you. I’m going to Jasmine because we’ve got about a minute to go and –

KATY: Okay.

DEBBIE: - Jasmine, I want you to finish our session with one thing that you would do in a rerun and what you’re so proud of.

JASMINE: In terms of a rerun I think that, you know, for anyone who is starting a program like this, it really be mindful of the self-care aspect because, you know, you can be pulled into the vortex and want to do everything and if the university is not ready to be supporting you, you can end up being quite burnt out. So I think it’s really important to get that buy in from those people who can actually support the program appropriately. And the thing that I’m most proud of is seeing the students who have gone through our program and have been able to gain appropriate employment and have realised their potential and also the mentors who have gone through our program and are now working in the field and I know that they are making a very valuable contribution. So those are the two aspects that I’m the most proud of.

DEBBIE: And, again, I think that’s something we’d all echo and a wonderful way to finish our Webinar. Thank you so much, Charlotte, Jasmine, Katy and Susan for sharing your experiences and over to you, Darlene.

DARLENE: Yeah. Sorry, everybody, to have to wrap you up so quickly and sorry we haven’t got any more time to wrap up but thank you. Thank you very much and go well.

DEBBIE: Thank you.

CHARLOTTE: Thanks everyone.

SUSAN: Thanks, everybody.

KATY: Thank you.