**Autism Hub - 03 - Main Panel - v06 - FINAL
TRANSCRIPT**

- Welcome to the Autism Hub. My name is Dr Maria Lathouras, Project Manager, and it's my pleasure to welcome you all here today. I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on where we gather today and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I recognise their connection to Country and their role in caring for and maintaining Country over thousands of years. May their strength and wisdom be with us today.

- The Autism Hub is a unique cross-sector service for families and educators in Queensland supporting children with autism from zero to 18 years of age. We provide parents and educators with ongoing support and advice at each stage through their education journey.

- The focus of today's session is senior years pathways and supporting schools and families to prepare their young people with autism for their future, and this focus aligns with the department's commitment to putting young Queenslanders on the right track for success in Year 12 and post post-school education and work, as well as the department's commitment to QCE attainment for all students.

- Transitions are critical for our young people with autism, and this is an area that requires careful consideration and planning. Families and schools continue to make contact with the Autism Hub Advisory Service regarding support and suggestions for students in their senior years or preparing as early as possible for the senior years. Schools and parents are navigating the interface of NDIS for the wellbeing of their young people and their future. In this evolving landscape, both parents and schools are seeking guidance.

- To share their knowledge and experience of supporting students through and after their senior years of schooling, it's my pleasure to introduce today's panel. Karen Berger is an Advisory Visiting Teacher, Post School Options who is famous in the metropolitan region for passionately supporting the schools, families, and students she works with. Karen has held the Advisory Visiting Teacher Post School Options role for eight years and has over 24 years of teaching experience, 14 of which have been within the special education field. As an Advisory Visiting Teacher Post School Options, Karen supports students, families, and teachers with transition planning to life after school.

- Associate Professor Michael Whelan is a researcher, a father of two young men with autism, a movie maker, book writer, musician, and all-round nice guy.

- Sharon Whip is an autism consultant, a mother of a young woman with autism and is one of the most enthusiastic advocates for successful post-school outcomes for young people with autism. In her current role, Sharon brings with her over 20 years of experience, eight of which have focused on supporting and advocating for autistic adults to achieve employment success. Sharon was involved in the Dandelion Program and is currently implementing methodologies into the Disability Employment Service.

- And finally, Lynelle MacDonald is a Senior Pathways teacher and has a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Queensland. However, her creativity does not stop there. Lynelle has a passion for building confidence and transferable skills for students and their post-school pathways. Lynelle has worked in a range of different high schools in Queensland and the United States as a Senior Pathways teacher at a metropolitan Brisbane State High School, and she brings 27 years of teaching experience, 15 of which have been within the special education field.

- Facilitating today's panel discussion is Autism Hub Director, Vicky Booth.

- Okay, thank you so much for joining us. We are really privileged to have this conversation this morning, and it's a very important conversation that we engage in all the time with parents and with schools about how we're going to successfully engage our young people and design a pathway for them beyond school and what can that look like. So, I'm so delighted to have you here today. And I feel like I'm in a coffee conversation with friends because we've all worked together for so long now. So, this is wonderful. Can I start with probably a very obvious question from all of us is, when we're talking about Senior Pathways and even when we were putting together this event at the Hub, what is a senior pathway? When we say, "Oh, we're going to talk about Senior Pathways today," what is it that we mean? And Lynelle, I'm actually going to start with you if I can. So, in your term, and you're a practitioner in a school, which means that out of all of us, actually at the moment, you'll probably be the most highly-qualified person to talk about senior pathway. What is a senior pathway?

- So, we see it as a supported process particularly through the senior phase of schooling, Grades 10, 11, 12, but it starts much earlier than that and it's student-centred. So, it has to be about what the students are interested in, where their skill set is, and with so much communication with families as well, particularly being led by someone with that disability-specific knowledge, yeah.

- Fabulous, and you're seeing this differently, Karen, from a regional point of view. So, not in the school, but more broadly across many different schools. So, do you see that a senior pathway definition or understanding of Senior Pathways looks really different in different schools?

- It does look really different and it depends on who's leading it, the knowledge and how much time is invested in the outcomes of students and really understanding what the data post-school looks like. And once people become aware of what is and isn't happening post school, then I think it drives the practice within a school.

- Yeah, and look, I think that brings me probably across to you, Sharon, in that, what that looks like beyond school is very much your work, isn't it? So, the team here, we'll talk about what it looks like in a school context, but it's that beyond school life that you and particularly Michael and I'm coming to you, Michael, what will that actually look like beyond school? So, is your understanding or definition of a senior pathway similar to the team that work in schools?

- Absolutely, it has to be person-centred, but what I'm, guess I want to talk about it from two perspectives, one as a mum. And what's really important is that we include that individual 100% in that discussion. I'm not seeing individuals come into the workforce knowing what they want to do, what they're good at, what strategies they need to adopt to succeed. They seem oblivious to all those things about themselves. And that's been my biggest learning from a work perspective is that our individuals with autism are not included enough in the discussions around their autism. From a mother's perspective, my daughter was adamant that she wanted to do science and she was dissuaded from that for her whole senior years because it was too stressful and yes, it is stressful, but she was so determined and she's in her last year of medical laboratory science now and working for Sullivan Nicolaides. So, I guess my point is it's that passion and she's out to prove some teachers wrong. Yeah, and that's a big motivator for her.

- Yeah, I love that story, and I'm going to come back to Olivia later because I think the idea of parents or even school teams thinking about a young person being able to change their mind or change tact is something that can be quite a difficult conversation to have with both the young person and the school. So, I'm going to come back and navigate that with you in a short while. But Michael, I know that that idea of Senior Pathways and heading out into the world of adulting is challenging for young people and for parents thinking, "What happens beyond Year 12?" So, can you talk a little bit about Senior Pathways in your understanding of that beyond the Year 12 barrier?

- Sure. Following up on the points that Lynelle and Sharon both made about it being a collaborative partnership between the teacher, the support providers at the school, the parent, and really getting a system to communicate effectively and continuously through that process is critical. So that a parent's idea, for example, of where things are heading are realistic, and that a teacher's understanding of the aspiration of the individual is accommodated and reflected and nurtured. And so, establishing modes of communication in those, through all years of schooling is important, but particularly in those years, as the individual on the spectrum starts to emerge in their interests and their passions, and like your daughter's interest with science, that's come back now as a, it's emerged after school and perhaps it wasn't given the chance to shine within the school, in a way in post-school, we're not motivated by that need to tick every box by the end of high school in a way that we might've been 15 or 20 years ago where the system was very rigid in higher education, because it's loosened up tremendously. And the end of schooling experience has also loosened up tremendously as well where we're not trying to get this massive cohort of young people to have the same experience in the same way, in the same timeline and all be happy chappies as well. It doesn't have to be like that anymore. So, it's a much more fluid, the end of schooling and the beginning of what's next, as we extend timelines for the Year 12 or exit moment and change the ways that you enter into whatever's happening next. So, there's a lot more fluidity there and a lot more opportunity for consultation and customising that journey.

- And I love that you say that, I certainly heard that in all of your answers about the possibility for flexibility and agility around what it is that the senior pathway may look like and about who leads that and how that can really impact the design of that journey and the successful outcomes of that journey about who's involved and particularly having the young person involved, I think it's really important. Thank you. I really hoped you would say that. That's great answers, tick, tick, tick. Karen, I'm coming back to you because Michael brings up a really good point and a lot of our schools are now grappling or considering the idea of how do we interface in the senior years with NDIS? And I know that you, now we're going to talk a lot in acronyms, I'm going to ask everybody to try and unpack the acronym. So, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and I know you speak fluent acronym, so you're going to have to be very careful. I'm going to pull you up a lot, but I know that you go around to schools and that you introduce parents and teachers to the services that are available and the importance of young people engaging in those services prior to leaving school. So, I wondered if you could unpack that a little bit for us today.

- In regards to just NDIS or just general?

- Well, let's talk about NDIS first.

- Okay, so, in regards to the NDIS, we really pushed that all schools engage in a relationship with the NDIS. Of course, as departmental workers, we don't work for the NDIS, we're teachers. So, it's about bringing the knowledge to the schools about what's available. So, that would mean that the NDIS would come to the school and run some information sessions and start educating parents on what the NDIS is about. It's about building relationships within the community, it's about having lots of conversations around what the NDIS can offer, what it can't offer. We would often have conversations with staff that would phone and say, "Oh, we've got a student that needs to engage with the NDIS, but the parent's really struggling with how to do that." So, we would bring an NDIS contact to the school or introduce those services. And then once the NDIS process starts, there can be some conversations from a school point of view of what could be beneficial for the young person, because what happens at home is often very different from what happens at school. And the needs we see at school are sometimes different from the needs that the school, sorry, from what happens at home. And so, lots of conversations about the whole person, and of course, always, student voice is so important. So, what is it that the student needs? What is it what the student wants and then how can the NDIS plan help support those things? So, as the young person continues on their journey, sometimes some of that funding from the NDIS can support those gaps that aren't offered in school.

- Thank you, and so how does that impact on planning or designing a senior pathway for young people?

- So in regards to the senior pathway, it's really important that the parents and the student are aware that they can access the NDIS if they, are they eligible and what funding they can access to support the goals of the senior pathway. So, it might mean, a young person might want to go to TAFE whilst they're at school, and I'll talk about this later on, but going to TAFE, there's not the same disability support that's available in school because the funding from school is meant to travel to TAFE, but that doesn't always happen. So, some people will access an NDIS funding and they will use their funding to have a person do some travel training with their young person or teach them how to get to and from TAFE.

- More of those life skills that perhaps they need to do to be able to independently go and do some of those activities.

- Some of the gaps, so, a young person might have a goal of wanting to do something, but there might be some gaps around their social skilling and their confidence. And that will really hinder their outcome if they haven't had some skilling around that. So, the NDIS is a good conversation about accessing some funding to help use some of those services whilst the young person is at school.

- Okay, thank you, and I think, Lynelle, I'm going to actually come back to you around that because I know that you engage transition officers like Karen to come into your school in Brisbane and speak with parents and your education team at the school. What impact has that had on the design of Senior Pathways for your students?

- Well, I think just having the, being able to access the transition offices and the service, the service has changed a little bit from when we first accessed probably seven or eight years ago where we bought into the service. So, now it is actually a regional initiative where schools are being upskilled, but probably the biggest benefit for our school was that just knowing about the different things, the different employment services, learning so much more about the NDIS and how the students can access it. It's always with that goal to employment that that's the message that I've always received. And I think just knowing about the extra networking and agencies outside of our classrooms, because essentially, we are teachers and we're teaching a curriculum, but knowing what else is out there, who else is out there that can assist the students and that we can build that into their plan. Because it really is, probably at our school, it's a four-year plan starting in Year 9.

- And so, let's roll on that because I think that's really interesting, and some of our schools have rung up about those sorts of programs that I know that your school starts very early. So, let's talk about those conversations that you have and when you start that.

- So, we start in Year 9 and it's actually, it was an initiative of the National Disability Coordinator's Office and that was something that the visiting teachers like Karen, that was information we received. There was a pilot program and it was for a work inspirations program. And so, the key to that was actually getting out into the community, accessing local businesses and doing behind-the-scenes tours and career conversations. So, it wasn't work experience, we didn't need to be there for multiple days, but it was probably four days spread over a period of time, and we based those businesses on interests from the students. We actually interviewed the students first, where did they think they'd like to work, what were they interested in? So, we tried to gear it a little bit like that. So, not every student went to every business, but most of them tried to visit to get a little bit of a feel that is childcare really what it looks like? Is retail what they think it is? So, from our work inspirations program, that is just a standard thing that we do now at the end of every Year 9 group that comes through and that then gauges, where do they think they might like to go for work experience? So, structured work placement. So, that is always in our Year 10 program, and we do-

- Lynelle, can I interrupt you, because I'm really interested to know, where does your SET planning fit in amongst all of that?

- Yes, so, it pretty much starts at the beginning of Grade 10. So, once they've had that work inspirations, career conversations, those conversations then continue back at school. And our SET planning is always with the student, with parent or carer and always a member of our team. So, they're not just given to any random teacher. So, it's always somebody who knows the student, probably someone who's been on that journey so far. And then we can start to look at, what did you see that you liked? They usually have started work experience by the time we've done our SET planning, and then we've also started talking about TAFE at school as well.

- Fantastic, excellent. This is really exciting. Now I know that Michael, you were important in instigating a program at one of our partner stakeholders, Autism Queensland, and that was really around starting some pathway planning for young people beyond school, wasn't it? And I'm talking about Studio G. So, can you talk a little bit about your work in that? Because I think that's really important.

- Sure, I was recruited by Autism Queensland to initially do research around a post-school transition program, to support young people who perhaps hadn't located their interests or their passions, or even just found a place for themselves in the world socially, culturally, personally.

- So perhaps hadn't had the beautiful experience that Lynelle was giving her students that you're-

- Yeah, something like that. But the aim of the program really was, it was an art-centred program and it was really luring people out of their digital caves into a new digital cave because we were doing digital arts making. And that's a passion for a lot of young people across that age group and it's also a passion, particularly for a lot of young people on the spectrum because they get to engage with an external world, but it's not in real time and it's mediated at the speed that they want it to happen. So, we did a program in animation, short filmmaking, game design, photography, creative writing, and it was all basically, "If you've got a laptop or an iPad, come on, if you don't, we'll give you one." And building community, helping people find their tribe and then in a constructivist model saying, "Let's make something together as a team or individually, let's set some goals and let's build your personal capacity, your experience, your self-esteem by taking a small project that you're really interested in and seeing how far we can take that." And there is an entire hidden curriculum in that, which is the building of social networks while they're there establishing personal relationships, getting to a certain point in a project that I think, "I don't know what to do next." So, they might have to ask for help, or perhaps they might have to accept help when it's offered or and as they start to then perhaps work in a team, they might have to compromise on the nature of what they're doing, or they might have to adapt their own goals and then share their ideas. They have to communicate. So, it was a Trojan horse in a certain way. We wheel in computers and really high-speed internet and some great applications, and then like moths to a flame, let kids come in and just play and enjoy themselves. And in a semi-structured project-based environment, build capacity, build confidence, and then start, as their interests and skills and passions start to emerge in that environment, then having a much stronger idea of where we might be able to support that transition, but it's a long game. It's not come for three weeks and then trampoline into a new job. It really is months, years, it's a slow process.

- And look, I love hearing that Studio G, because of course here at the Autism Hub, we have the offset of that for younger people of Teen Tech Shed that we host here at The Hub here at Woolloongabba. And so, we can see that some of the mentors from Studio G are now looking at the next generation of those young Studio G team in Teen Tech Shed, which is such a lovely alignment. So, that's something that I guess in conversations as parents and as teachers, we need to be really careful of not squashing those dreams and ambitions and thoughts, particularly very early when you're starting those conversations in Year 9. There is however, I guess, a conversation that Sharon, I'm going to bring you into about the expectations of the young person in employment, but also the expectations of the employers when they get there, isn't there? So, I know you've got vast experience and every time we want to know about this area of work, we come straight back to you. So, could you perhaps unpack a little bit of that, that around expectations?

- Absolutely, so, I work with the DXE with the employment program and we don't do interviews, we do assessments where we bring autistic individuals in over a two to three-week assessment. We just look at their ability for teamwork and follow instructions and communicate respectfully to each other, those sorts of things. So, we do that over two to three weeks here at The Hub when they're in Brisbane, and we've all seen these shy, young people come in, who won't say a word and are so nervous and so anxious, three weeks later, leave this The Hub just so empowered. And often we end in here with presentations where there's tears, isn't there? And they go, "Finally, I'm around really cool autistic people and in a team that understand autism and understand me and know how to get the best out of me." So, it's a wonderful journey. And then we start employment. And now our program is wonderful in that we have an autism consultant with our teams with DXE. And so, I've worked alongside up to 20 individuals in a professional IT environment, 40 hours a week here in Brisbane. And so, what that might look like is we get these young people, not even young people, these people coming into work, and they have no context whatsoever of what work is. So, a lot of our, we've got 120 employees across Australia now, and most of them would never have worked, and if they have worked, it's been in a fast-food restaurant or something totally not aligned to their skills. So, they do come in and we really have to start at the grassroots around why do we work? Like why do we all turn up every day to work when we could sit at home? Like, what's the answer to that? So, we have to start getting context around why we do that day in and day out and what teamwork is, and why things like time sheets are important and why you don't send emails to the whole office in capitals and tell them they're idiots when they are. And so, all day, every day, we give context around the work environment and what work is and why we do it and why it's important to do a good job. And so that's what I've been lucky enough to do for the last five or six years.

- And it's exceptional work. We know that, we certainly know that. I'm going to just ask one more question on this, and then we're going to move away because I think there is a really great conversation to happen around subject selection, and I'm going to come back to this team and then ask for some specific advice from you, Michael. But I know one of the things that you're really strong on at your school, Lynelle is actually about encouraging our young people to do volunteer work, and you've already spoken about work experience, but I think that some schools perhaps don't consider that as part of a seniors pathway or designing subjects for young people, even though we know that that can now attribute to their QC attainment, which is fantastic. But also for parents, when we start to look at life beyond school and building a quality of life that can give them some more skills. So, I know that you've incorporated volunteering at your school, can you talk a little bit about that?

- Yeah, so, we run the Cert II Active Volunteering, and we also do Cert II skills for Work and Vocational Pathways, but particularly our volunteering certificate course, while it can be a little bit paperwork heavy, so, some of our students with autism do struggle with that a little bit. We have to keep encouraging them. The opportunity for them to do volunteering work, so, first of all, to go out into the community, sometimes the volunteering work isn't specific to their skillset, but that's where we're looking at those, what they think is their skillset, we're looking for those transferable skills. So, those soft skills that a little bit like Sharon said, how do we communicate with people? How do we introduce ourselves? How do we follow those instructions? And I know our school has a close relationship with a morning breakfast service to those who are less fortunate. And so, for some of our students, it's very daunting the first couple of times they go, but we make sure they visit first, they know who they're going to be working with, what it looks like. So, that's probably a big part Vicky, is really preparing in advance our students, but the benefits of that by the time they've been going one morning a week for the whole of Year 11 and Year 12, they're just amazing, just the confidence. And that's what we've always said that even when you do leave school, if you're not working, you must be volunteering. And because they've had that opportunity, it's not this scary thing. And sometimes volunteering will lead to that job. It's also something great for their resume. So, yeah, so that's a program that we've actually built into and seeing-

- Yeah, and I think I like particularly, Lynelle, that it does contribute towards QC attainment. And so, some schools who are really thinking about how they can diversify their subject offerings, your certificate in active volunteering is a great opportunity to do both, getting them some employable skills, or as you say, transferable skills, but also contributing to those fabulous points that we're all looking towards at the end of Year 12. Yeah, very good. And I certainly like the idea that they can contribute to their community beyond Year 12. And so, having something that they're familiar with beyond school is also a great builder of their own local community and their support team, which both Sharon and Michael have spoken so clearly about today. We have calls to the advisory line here at the Autism Hub asking about two acronyms and that's the DES and SLES. So, could you unpack those acronyms for us and talk to us about how they play into some of this preparation for beyond school?

- Sure, so, the word DES in school comes to me sometimes with lots of anger from staff and sometimes lots of happiness, but a DES is a Disability Employment Service. So, around school land, we hear people talking about DESs or D-E-S. So, what is a DES? So, a Disability Employment Service is an employment service geared towards supporting people with disabilities. In the world outside of school, they're available for people between the ages of 14 to 65 that have a disability. In school land, they are available for students with a verified disability that are in Year 11 or in their final year of schooling. Now, the only way a student can access a DES in Year 11 is if they're accessing a school-based traineeship or apprenticeship, and then they can access them in Year 12, if they would like some support in finding part-time employment. So, in regards to how the schools access a DES, well, using a DES is user choice, not school choice. So, we need to provide opportunities for parents and students to be educated on what a DES is and when they can access them. So, what the Disability Employment Service does, is it in theory, it's to work with the young person to find out what their goals are, what they're interested in, what type of employment they would like, and then source employment and support them on their employment journey. And that might mean engaging with interview skills, writing resume, supporting work experience, and going to work. To access a Disability Employment Service in the school world, you need to be able to be employed for a minimum of eight-hours a week. So, that means the student needs to be able to work independently. So, someone is not going to go with them every day that they turn up to work and work by themselves.

- Okay and what about a SLES?

- So, a SLES is a School Leaver's Employment Supplement, or is it might be education supplement, it's tricky. The SLES funding is $22,000 for two years. So, over two years, to support students who aren't quite ready to access further education or employment post school. To be eligible for a SLES package, you have to be an NDIS participant and you apply for a SLES package in your NDIS package, and then if SLES is approved, you can access SLES providers. Now the DES world are the people that mainly run SLES programs.

- I told you she spoke in fluent acronym. I told you that, didn't I? Who is this information most important for, Karen?

- So, the SLES is only available to school leavers, but that can look very differently for many students. So, the SLES could be, it's predominantly for students in Year 12, who aren't quite ready for school to end, and they've still got room to learn, but they don't need to be in the school land.

- So, the school could be involved in this conversation, definitely the student-

- The NDIS, yes, but there's some times students that, like I have had a student in Year 11 who school didn't work for them, but they weren't ready to go to a DES because the theory is that we access our SLES, they build our skills up and then we go to a DES. But there are some students in Year 11 that have that SLES approved early and they plan on leaving school. And we also have some students that are doing a QCIA or have a flexible timetable, they might be doing a VPR. So, a three-year senior pathway and they might access their SLES, and whilst they're doing their part-time employment, their part-time education, they use their SLES funding and start learning some of those soft skills whilst they're still at school on their senior pathway.

- So, it is very much ours, which is why we talk about designing a senior pathway because you have to design it for a young person, don't you?

- Yes, can I just say that SLES funding needs to be applied for whilst the student is at school because the money becomes available with their NDIS package. So, it's no use the SLES funding being spoken about post-school. It needs to be a conversation that starts in Year 11, or even as early as Year 9 or 10, but it's funding that needs to be approved whilst they're at school, not post-school.

- I'm glad that you interrupted, because I think that is very important information for both parents and for teachers and educators in schools to know. Michael, I really want to ask you more about the work that you're doing with the Autism Cooperative Research Centre, because we have not mentioned them yet today. And the Department of Education and the Autism Hub are a partner stakeholder, the only education department in Australia, I'd like to remind you, who are a partner stakeholder with the Autism CRC, and we certainly very much value the work that they've done in this area. And I know that you have been very much involved in that work. So, could you share a little bit about that work?

- Sure, the Autism CRC has been running for almost eight years and it's recently just got a two-year extension on that program with some supplementary funding from the Commonwealth. There are three programs in the Autism CRC. An early childhood, a school years and adult programs, and each of them have fairly specific research briefs. And there are multiple projects existing within each of those three domains. Most of which have matured now and are coming to their final report stage. Some were completed earlier in the period. My involvement in that has been with a project, a knowledge translation project, looking at all of the research that's been occurring in the school year's program and thinking, "How can the outputs of that research be translated for as usable best-practice material for teachers in mainstream classrooms and inclusive classrooms?" So, we co-designed and developed a program which has now become inclusioned.edu.au, which is a learning portal for teachers to access a series of best-practice resources that are very challenge-based with a searchable engine, which allows teachers to come in, identify what the challenges they're hoping to address or the practice that they're hoping to implement, find appropriate resources. The unique part of the program is that in terms of the visual presentation style we've borrowed from things like social media or Netflix or Apple TV and things like that to try and design a portal that's intuitive, very friendly, but provides that evidence base. So, we provide for example, video previews of a practice. So, if you're looking to do a session on visual sequencing, there's a three-minute video which shows the preparation, the implementation, the evaluation. And so that a teacher can within three minutes think, "That's what I need," or "No, that's not what I need, that's not what I need." And then behind that trailer is then a rich range of resources for the planning process, the goal setting part of the process, it follows AITSL guidelines in terms of best-practice implementation.

- And I love that, Michael, because it actually starts to build teachers as research practitioners, doesn't it? And gets the gaps of what's happening in a classroom back to the research team to know what it is that we want more information about and vice versa.

- Absolutely, it's very much an open communication system. And it also provides documentation in terms of professional learning for teachers, the number of hours implicit in implementing a practice are logged, and then certificates of completion of that particular implementation process are available to provide evidence for professional learning for teachers as they progress through their cycle of professional learning requirements. What I should mention as well is that the research involved teachers from metropolitan regional and remote schools in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, and Western Australia, and they were involved in the process of establishing their needs in terms of priorities, in terms of authoritative voices versus pedagogy and implementation and universal design for learning principles. It also included parents, how do they need to participate in those collaborative partnerships? What do they need to know? And then we went to kids on the spectrum and said, "if you could design the best teacher, what would they look like? And if you could design the best classroom, what elements would it have in it? And how would you interact with them?" And so, we've tried to pull that co-design experience into building inclusionEd. And once we've done that, we've gone back to teachers in various settings and said, "what do you think of the interface, does it make sense to you? Is it logical? Is the material adequate? Is the information sequential and logical for implementation?" And so that continuous co-design conversation with teachers combining with that community of practice element where we're connecting teachers with teachers, as well as with researchers is the long-term goal.

- And I hear also in your conversation there, Michael, the real strength of including student voice, and certainly that's a theme that we've heard very clearly today, that student voice needs to be highlighted and privileged in the conversations that we're having, and I know certainly at the Autism Hub, that has been one of our themes throughout April this year is looking at the role that student voice plays in school improvement and how important it is that we continue to privilege their voice in this conversations.

- Yeah, a guiding principle of the Autism CRC is the presence of autistic people in every stage of research, whether it's in research design, whether it's in data collection, whether it's in representation, how do you want to be viewed in this research? What's your presence going to be and what will that look like right through to then critiquing the materials as they're delivered, and of course, language, because language is important and terminology is a critical part of that. And the Autism CRC has a fabulous free online language resource in terms of terminology, not just in autism, but broadly across diversity domains generally.

- Excellent, that's a great plug. I love it.

- And it's free.

- Love it. And it's free. And this is a really a great, actually, you've given me a fabulous segue for Sharon, because you're talking a little more about how a young person may be feeling, Sharon, and I want to introduce a conversation with you about interoception. So, can you unpack that a little bit more for us?

- The greatest learning I've had over the last six or seven years is that autistic people come into the workplace and they don't understand autism. And that was one of the most important things I learned. So, when we have teams start with us, we actually run an autism training with them. And they're actually the most receptive audience of any of our training that we have run because if you think about it, when do we teach people about autism? Like when do we, through that journey of being diagnosed, going through school, what does autism mean to the way I learn? Like, have I got strong areas of executive functioning, or have I got challenges in some areas of executive functioning? So, employees coming in to work with us and they don't know that they have executive dysfunction, and so they don't know how to pick the right pieces of information out of instructions, or if they're getting multiple instructions and deadlines that they don't realise about themselves, that's actually really difficult for them to do. So, one of the most wonderful things that we do is talk to them about that and say, "You're not defective, you're not lazy, you're not trying to get out of work, this is actually how your brain is wired and you have to adopt strategies to follow instructions." So, I love to see my team walking around with a notebook and they highlight things and they write things down and they do to do lists and we always encourage them, "That's important, that info, can you write that down?" Because I'm helping them pick from all of this verbal stuff that's going on, pick what's important. What's those five words that they need to remember? So, that's been really important, but also one of the greatest things I've learned as well is interoception. And Emma Goodall is an amazing autistic lady who has written a program and they're running them in some schools in Adelaide and I came across the materials a couple of years ago, and I was just amazed to learn about interoception and how autistic people actually can't feel what's happening within their body. And so, they're not picking up the signs of stress and fatigue and things like that. So, how that manifests in the workplace is that someone will just go into a meltdown. They'll become really stressed very quickly, and they won't have known that they're getting close to that point because they can't read the signals for their body. So, what we do, we do a lot of work with them in identifying that and observing that and putting some words and language around what led to that. So, starting to feel and understand the emotions and the feelings that they're having in their body. And so, we do have to take on an observation role. And in a school context, this was really important for my daughter, and I didn't know it at the time, but she appeared and she can still appear to want to get out of things and to become very overwhelmed and go into avoidance. So, she's got assignments due, especially in senior years. "Executive dysfunction, that's all a bit stressful, I can't really break it all down and work out what I've got to do and by when," and so the time comes for putting the assignment in, it's not done, meltdown, then self-loathing. "I'm hopeless, I'm terrible." It was just a cycle for two or three years of that. And what I now know is that she didn't know all of that about herself, and certainly the school didn't either, because that's kind of complex. But what we do now in our programs and at work is actually start talking to them about that, so that individuals know they're not necessarily manipulative or avoiding or lazy, that's actually how they're wired. And so that has just been so empowering for individuals that I work with to go, "Okay, I have executive dysfunction, I'm unorganised. I need to do these things," rather than, "Oh, I'm hopeless, I'm lazy. I never achieve anything." And that's been wonderful, most exciting part of the work that I've done, I think.

- Thank you for that. I love that, I really love that, and certainly we have started to share the work of Emma Goodall with the wellbeing and mental health teams here at the Department of Education, knowing how vital it is that we have a better understanding about interoception for our young people with autism, particularly in those senior phases of learning when things are becoming a little bit more challenging. Lynelle, I'm coming back to you now, and we're going to take a little bit of a different direction. I'm particularly interested, and I know schools ask us this all the time about how creative you can become in senior with subject offerings. Now I know at your school, you offer an enormous amount of subject offerings, which I can only imagine would be enormous interest in timetabling, but however, it does help your students to cover a lot of their diverse skills and strengths. So, can you share with us some of the things that you do in the senior as far as subjects are concerned? Very operational question, I know.

- Yeah, so, I suppose we started to see a few years ago that there was a group of students coming through where they would look at a typical senior timetable subject selection, and there just wasn't anything suitable for many of them. So then we would see lots of changes in the timetable. Students not happy, attendance was affected. So, that's where we went a little bit around the other way looking at, "Okay, who are our students? What sorts of things might they like to try?" So, we were lucky to bring in some of the practice subjects. So, the hospitality in practice, agricultural in practices. So, we've brought in a lot of those subjects. So, there's just that little bit more flexibility, not so ATAR, that's another acronym. It's not university driven at this stage.

- Oh, you offer all of those subjects as well, don't you?

- Yes, that's right, yes. And students can choose anything, but we're always having that conversation about where they'll get the greatest success. A couple of other things that we really promote and we've spoken briefly about is TAFE at school. So, we get the booklet out and we start looking at that in Year 10, and there's just so many different subjects there that can be offered at school, but one day a week, the students can go out. So, not only are they trying something new, something they like, but the other side of it is they gain the confidence, they're seeing adult learning for the first time, they don't have to wear a uniform. We support them very much in the first part, but even in the application, but particularly with travel training, we will try to send support staff to make sure they get to where they need to go and then gently ease back from that. And we also offer another program, it's called ASDAN. Now I did write this down, the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network. So, it's actually a program from the UK and Education Queensland has supported the running of this program in many schools previously. It's a little bit like the Duke of Edinburgh Award, where there's a bronze, silver, gold level and the students, they do challenges. So, each module is about 10 hours of credit resulting in 60 hours for either the bronze, then the silver, then the gold. So, that has allowed students who might otherwise be disengaged to really go the next step further than TAFE to really be working on a topic of their interest. So, it's very, very specific to the student, but they're building their skillset. They might need to research, they might need to present, they might need to get out in the community or do a practical challenge. And if they start that early enough, like they do at our school in Grade 10, then in Year 11, they can be achieving the silver for one QC point and then the gold in Year 12 for another QC point. So, collectively it's about the equivalent to a Certificate I course with two QC credit points.

- I think that's probably something that schools often do ask us about knowing that it's important for our young people to achieve their QCE. And so how can we support them with their strengths to be able to achieve that goal? And I think some of the creativity that comes from your team, as Maria said in the introduction, your creativity is not just in the arts clearly, it's also about designing some of these wonderful individual pathways. I did wonder whether I could ask you all the same one question like I started this conversation and I know we could've spoken for a lot longer today than what we have already, but I do know there are some burning questions. So, in your experience, what has been a valuable lesson that you've learned from your work in Senior Pathways with young people with autism? Michael, I'm going to start with you.

- My big take home, I think for me personally, as a parent and as well as when I teach is finding the opportunities for people to locate their strengths, and when they do that, they find their tribe and when they find their tribe, they find their social network and their friendship networks, and that then gives them the confidence to do perhaps more social and academic risk-taking where they'll feel more likely that they might succeed.

- Thank you, Sharon, what about you? You say often that your most valuable experience has actually been with your beautiful daughter, Olivia, who's 22, and so what do you think she's taught you, Sharon?

- Look and Michael would say the same. It is our normal, I love everything about her difference and she gives me context, I guess, I suppose an answer to your question, I think giving context is what we need to do around all situations, everything. "Why do you do a job interview? What's the importance of it?" Like, we don't really explain those nuances of everything we do. And so, I think we need to be better at giving context because once these beautiful people understand why they've got to do this stuff and what the expectations, and this beautiful Ryan, he said to me one day, two or three years ago, "Sharon, you do all this autism awareness training, where's the neurotypical training? Why aren't you teaching about what you want?" And I'm like, "That's amazing." So I said, "What do you want to learn?" And he said, "I want to know why we got to talk at events and why are events important? And why did you put so much importance on teamwork? I like working on my own." Amazing points. So, yeah. So, I did write some modules on why small talk's important to neurotypicals and why teamwork's important to neurotypicals, and so they read that and go, "Oh, okay. Now I see why they do this and talk about the weather." And in my beautiful team, we were outnumbered and they would make fun of us and go, "She's talking about the weather again." Or I'd say, "How are you feeling?" And they'd go, "I don't feel, Sharon." So, that's beautiful, I'll finish with that.

- That's great learning, and yeah, absolutely. And there are things that we do tend to turn on their side, don't we? So, I love that. What about you, Karen? What has been a valuable learning for you in this space?

- I've been really fortunate to work across a number of schools with a number of amazing staff and families, but the biggest thing that I can take away and my advice to give to anybody on this Senior Pathway journey is to, is the value of being flexible, the value of experience and the most valuable is the student voice. So, I would always start a conversation when I used to do meetings with students and say, "What is it that you're going to do when you leave school?" And I didn't even give them an opportunity to answer, and I'd say, "Is it work, is it learning or is it a combination of both? 'Cause it's not sitting on the couch, eating chips and using the Wi-Fi at home post school." And they look at me, but it was a really good conversation to make them really think about what they wanted to do, and then we would always work backwards, and when I worked at schools that were fabulous with allowing students to maybe go to TAFE and choose some of those subjects, like Lynelle was talking about, that possibly wasn't anything they wanted to do when they left school, but it gave them confidence. Well, students were doing traineeships whilst they're at school. And our traineeship is just like doing a subject at school, except you do it in the workplace and you get paid. It's not their forever job, but the confidence that I've seen grow with so many students, because we've allowed students to be flexible in their approach to learning, and that schools have been open-minded and said, "Okay, well, let's let the student drive what happens." So, the earlier people start allowing young people to engage in conversations about their future, the better the outcomes.

- Fabulous, and Lynelle we'll come to you.

- My comment follows on from Karen, actually that just that early intervention, getting to know the student, involving the family as much as we can as well, but starting to track, and that's something that our school does a lot is just tracking the student development, their interests, they've tried something, "No, that's not it, let's change direction," but just keeping an eye on that and constantly checking in the whole way through, from the end of Year 9 to the end of Year 12 and a lesson we have to, is just actually having an exit meeting. So, in term three, getting the family and having the student, the key stakeholders who have worked with the students through that time and just checking that they do have a plan for after school. And it's not in 50 years’ time, but just, "What are you doing next year when suddenly you have 30 extra hours in your week that you're not going to be here with us?" And just making sure that the students have a bit of an action checklist of, "Well, you need to be making sure you're doing these things and the family knows as well." So, I think is sending them on their way with just a little bit of a toolkit and some ideas as well. And the success that you talk about, Sharon, we'll often get students coming back and sharing, "I'm on TAFE now," or, "I've got a job," and it's just amazing just to see that happening. So, that's really what it's all about is having a successful and positive post school outcomes.

- Absolutely.

- Thank you to our audience and panel for their keen participation and robust conversation. We are excited about the information that has been shared today. This conversation has been recorded, so, it can be shared through the Autism Hub website and social media channels. We hope the conversation has helped you to build upon your knowledge of Senior School pathways.