

Article

Autistic Adults' Reflections on What Supported Their Transitioning from Secondary School

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Abstract: Identifying ways to improve transition support for autistic students exiting secondary school is an important research priority. However, few studies have consulted with autistic/autism community members to identify how to make this support effective. This co-produced study asked autistic adults to reflect on their own transition, with the aim of identifying what was helpful and effective in supporting their transitioning from secondary school. It also aimed to identify whether there were any differences for students from non-metropolitan areas. Ten autistic adults participated in semi-structured interviews conducted online or via telephone. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, which generated two themes: (1) accessing opportunities that supported decision making and (2) being able to develop the “skills of adulthood”. The findings suggest the importance of supporting all autistic students to explore multiple pathways to make well-informed post-school decisions. A holistic approach is needed to support autistic students in developing the logistical skills and independence needed to succeed in post-school life. This approach should include guidance from autistic role models. For autistic young people attending non-metropolitan schools, the impact of local cultures and additional logistical barriers indicate that they may need further tailored support to aid their transition to adulthood.

Keywords: autism; special education; decision making; logistic demand; holistic approach; human development; high school; teenagers; adulthood



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1. Introduction

Autistic students may experience some differences in social communication and behaviour [1] that could impact their experience of completing life-stage and educational transitions. Australian data estimate that approximately 3.2% of school students are autistic [2] and that approximately 83% of identified autistic individuals are aged under 25 [3]. This includes autistic secondary school students who are approaching the transition to post-school life. Autistic school leavers are known to experience much poorer post-school outcomes than their non-autistic peers [4]. For example, 75% of autistic people finish education at the end of secondary school. They also experience higher rates of unemployment when compared to other groups of school leavers [5]. Autistic adults who have successfully completed post-school education report challenges with securing and maintaining employment [6]. The reasons for poorer post-school outcomes are complex and interwoven, and they reflect the unaccommodating environments, poor supports, and exclusion and discrimination that can be experienced by autistic people [4]. These outcomes are known to be even poorer for autistic young people from non-metropolitan areas. For non-metropolitan autistic individuals, the availability and provision of appropriate supports and services are often even more limited [4]. Existing research is limited in what it reports about helpful and effective supports that could be implemented to support autistic students from both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas as they transition from

secondary school to post-school life [7]. However, it is widely known that the provision of autism-specific, affirming supports can improve the lives of autistic people [4]. Therefore, identifying and implementing effective supports for autistic students as they prepare for the transition to post-school life may improve these outcomes.

Transitioning from school to adulthood is known to be challenging for young people (autistic and non-autistic). This is because they can experience multiple emotions and may need to adjust their identity as they move into new adult roles [8–11]. The traditional marker of this transition is the completion of school. Post-transition pathways may include gaining employment; the movement to further education or employment; and changes in household, community, and social participation [12]. There is no exactly defined moment at which transition planning begins. Despite this, it is suggested that preparation and planning for the transition ideally should commence as a young person enters their teenage years [12]. This is because young people who are prepared to navigate this change in identity and adaptation to their new social roles generally experience a more successful transition to post-school life [11]. However, it is likely that, even with transition plans in place, autistic young people transitioning from school may encounter additional complications [6,13,14]. This transition places autistic young people, who often prefer regularity and structure [15,16], into a situation that requires the creation and mastery of new routines. These can be difficult to navigate without appropriate support. Engaging in the sometimes complex social exchanges required within a new context may also be challenging for some autistic people [17]. This is because this new context may not always support autistic people's preferences and approaches to social communication [1]. For autistic individuals living in non-metropolitan locations across Australia, there may be even more challenges, as these individuals are less likely to be able to access necessary supports and services [4]. Additionally, their transitioning from school may involve having to move away from the established relationships and routines of home and from the support of family and friends [18].

The additional challenges that autistic young people may encounter during their transition to post-school life—even in the presence of a transition plan—highlight the importance of improving transition planning for autistic young people [19]. It is often suggested that early planning is necessary for transition success [20]. Effective, personalised, and timely transition planning has been shown to improve rates of employment, to increase success in post-school settings, and to increase happiness and community participation for adults with disabilities [21]. However, current approaches to transition preparation for autistic students have been described as persistently unsatisfactory [22]. Recent studies have shown that nearly one-quarter of autistic students are not involved in any transition planning [23]. When planning is available, it is often fragmented and non-collaborative, and it does not engage the autistic young people fully in the process [22]. This means that autistic students are often not active participants [24], limiting their ability to be involved in decisions about their next steps [22]. The focus of transition planning tends to be on academic performance. This is often at the expense of providing planning that is specific and relevant to the transition needs of autistic students [23]. As such, for many autistic students, their transition plan contains inappropriate goals [25]. It also may not include supports that are flexible, appropriate, or effective [26]. Clearly, there is more to learn about how to plan to effectively support autistic young people as they transition on from secondary school and into post-school life [7].

The lived experience and expertise of autistic adults must be prioritised when seeking new knowledge about the transition to post-school life. Autistic people are experts in their own experience who provide rich contributions and insights into experiences [27,28]. However, autism research sometimes fails to truly describe autistic life experiences [29], and, within the current body of research examining autistic students' transition to post-school life, the views of autistic people are not always presented [7]. Furthermore, it is known that autism research co-designed with autistic people enables the gathering of knowledge that more authentically presents autistic experiences [30]. However, research on autistic students' transition to post-school life shows little to no evidence of consideration

of community members in research design and conduct [7]. As such, to improve the effectiveness of the support provided to autistic young people as they transition to post-school life, co-produced research that documents the views of autistic adults who have experienced this transition is needed.

Aims

The first aim of this study was to explore what autistic people found helpful and effective in supporting their transition from secondary school into post-school life and to identify additional supports that they feel may have aided their transition. The second aim was to explore whether autistic people who were students in non-metropolitan areas identified the need for different supports from those who were students in metropolitan areas. In doing this, this study will provide schools, families, and communities with an understanding of the types of activities and strategies that can be utilised to effectively support autistic students as they transition to post-school life. It will also identify whether there are differences in the supports that should be provided for autistic young people attending school in non-metropolitan areas. The outcomes of this research could address the Royal Commission's recommendation that all educational authorities in Australia create a dedicated transition support service for students with disabilities to aid the transition to post-school life [31]. Therefore, this study posed the following research questions:

1. What are autistic adults' perceptions of the helpful and effective supports that they received during their transition from secondary school?
2. Are there differences between students from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas of Australia in terms of helpful and effective supports during the transition phase?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Ethics

Prior to the commencement of the study, Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (2023/672) granted ethical approval. Throughout the study, the authors followed all the requirements of the university's human research ethical guidelines and procedures. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were provided with sufficient information about the research to enable them to decide whether to consent to participate. They were also aware that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time.

2.2. Community Involvement

The research team collaborated with members of the autistic and autism communities and were guided by an autistic research consultant throughout the research design, conduct, and analysis. As such, this project benefited from the sharing of expertise and lived experience by autistic people and their supporters. Details of this co-production are included below.

2.3. Recruitment and Participants

The first author prepared the recruitment materials and information and consent sheets in consultation with members of the autism and autistic communities. The project's autistic research consultant also provided feedback. The authors advertised the study through social media posts, through Griffith University's volunteer research website, and via posters placed in allied health offices. The advertisement invited autistic adults (diagnosed or self-identified) who had attended secondary school in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan parts of Australia and who had completed the transition to post-school life to participate. Participants who self-identified as autistic but did not have a formal diagnosis were welcome to participate to allow for known barriers to formal autism diagnosis, such as difficulties in being referred and assessed [32]. Participants could follow a link or scan a QR code to read and complete the information and informed consent forms.

Due to the unusually high number of initial responses to the social media advertisement (753), the authors implemented screening procedures as per Pellicano et al. [33].

Following these procedures, there were 16 responses deemed authentic and meeting the inclusion criteria. Of these, 10 respondents were able to be contacted and consented to participate in an interview. Four participants had attended secondary school in a non-metropolitan area of Australia, and six in a metropolitan area. An overview of the participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information and interview method.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Autism Diagnosis	Number of Years Since Transition	Geographic Locality of Australian School Attended	Geographic Australian Locality in Which Currently Living	Interview Method
Clare	21	White	Female	Clinical diagnosis after finishing school	Less than 5	Metropolitan	Metropolitan	Video call on Teams
Helen	21	White	Female	Clinical diagnosis after finishing school ^a	Less than 5	Metropolitan	Metropolitan	Telephone call
Maree	25	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Female	Self-identified after finishing school	6 to 10	Regional/rural	Regional/rural	Audio call on Teams
Jon	28	Asian	Male	Clinical diagnosis after finishing school	11 to 20	Metropolitan	Metropolitan	Live chat on Teams
Tia	29	White	Female	Self-identified while at school	11 to 20	Metropolitan	Metropolitan	Telephone call
Kim	31	White	Female	Clinical diagnosis after finishing school ^a	11 to 20	Regional/rural	Regional/rural	Live chat on Teams
Julie	38	White	Female	Clinical diagnosis after finishing school	21+	Metropolitan	Metropolitan	Video call on Teams
Luke	42	White	Male	Self-identified after finishing school	21+	Regional/rural	Metropolitan	Video call on Teams
Tilly	47	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Female	Clinical diagnosis after finishing school	21+	Regional/rural	Regional/rural	Telephone call
Mark	48	White	Male	Clinical diagnosis after finishing school ^b	21+	Metropolitan	Regional/rural	Video call on Teams

^a The process for Kim and Helen's diagnosis began when they were in school, but formal diagnosis occurred after finishing school. ^b Mark was diagnosed with PDD-NOS at age 3 but was not diagnosed autistic until after finishing school.

2.4. Procedure

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to obtain recollections of multiple experiences of the transition. Its pragmatic position enabled the researchers to seek knowledge based on exploring people's understandings and perspectives [34,35]. This pragmatic position is derived from the ontological and epistemological researcher beliefs that reality and knowledge are always viewed through the lens of human experience [36]. As such, a draft interview guide was developed with the project's autistic research consultant. Feedback on this was gained from members of the autistic/autism communities. This guide was piloted with an autistic adult, and minor adjustments to the wording and order of some questions were made based on feedback. This resulted in a guide containing 18 key questions, plus 30 additional probe questions to be used if required, that asked the participants about (a) their recollections of the plans that they had for post-school life; (b) the support that they had in preparing for, and then transitioning to, post-school life; (c) challenges that they encountered during the transition; and (d) additional supports that they believe would have been helpful. A copy of this guide can be obtained from

the authors on request. The participants were provided with the interview guide prior to the interview. Based on the recommendations of the project's autistic research consultant, the participants were given the option to participate in interviews via telephone or via Microsoft Teams voice, video, or live chat. The interviews were conducted over a four-week period during October and November 2023 by the first author, who is a PhD candidate and has completed training on qualitative research. The interviews were completed under the supervision of the three co-authors, who are experienced qualitative researchers. Author two provided intensive support throughout the interview process, including providing feedback and training based on observations of the pilot interview. The interviews ranged from 19 min to 68 min (mean = 47.06; SD = 14.79), and the participants were offered breaks throughout each interview. In total, there were 7 h, 50 min, and 37 s of data collected. All interviews included participants being informed that they could take breaks at any time, as recommended by the project's autistic research consultant. Voice and video interviews were recorded with a professional service providing verbatim transcripts, which were emailed to the participants for approval.

2.5. Data Analysis

The authors used thematic analysis to analyse all transcripts following Braun and Clarke's [37] six-step approach. They chose iterative thematic analysis to allow for the identification of patterns and themes across the interviews [37]. This involved coding and analysing the data through six steps: familiarisation, the creation of initial codes, searching for themes, mapping the themes, refining the themes, and extracting and then generating a report [37]. This approach enables the organisation of findings in a consistent manner, leading to the identification of similarities and differences in participant perspectives. As such, the first author read the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data and shared the initial responses to the transcripts with the project's autistic research consultant. This enabled rich discussions of these initial responses. An inductive approach was then used to analyse each line of data, which led to initial code generation. The codes enabled the organisation of data into distinct ideas that the participants presented in response to the research questions. The co-authors reviewed these codes, and the project's autistic research consultant offered feedback on them. The first author then refined the codes by considering the feedback, combining similar codes, and adding additional codes. Themes were developed, named, and reviewed through mapping and refining. The themes were discussed by the research team, who adopted an iterative and reflective process to develop and refine them until the final themes were agreed upon. The first author then allocated data to these themes.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness throughout this qualitative research project, the research team implemented several strategies. As per Ahmed [38], the team ensured credibility by taking a reflexive approach, acknowledging biases and working with the project's autistic research consultant to overcome them. To ensure dependability [38], the first author maintained precise methodological documentation, resulting in a comprehensive audit trail. Initially, the first author and the second author (who is an experienced qualitative researcher) separately coded an interview and shared their initial coding and insights. To ensure confirmability [38], peer debriefing was implemented across the project. In particular, this included all authors discussing the coding and themes throughout all stages of analysis. Finally, the first author maintained a reflexive journal [38], which enabled the tracking of personal thoughts, biases, and reflections across the project.

3. Results

Two main themes were generated from the interviews, as presented in Figure 1. The first, accessing opportunities that supported decision making, describes how accessing opportunities and being empowered to make informed decisions were helpful to partic-

ipants during their transition to post-school life. The second, being able to develop the “skills of adulthood”, explores the skills that the participants felt were helpful, or would have been helpful, as they transitioned from school to post-school life, as well as some suggestions on how these could be holistically developed. Under each of these themes, multiple subthemes were identified; these will be discussed in turn.

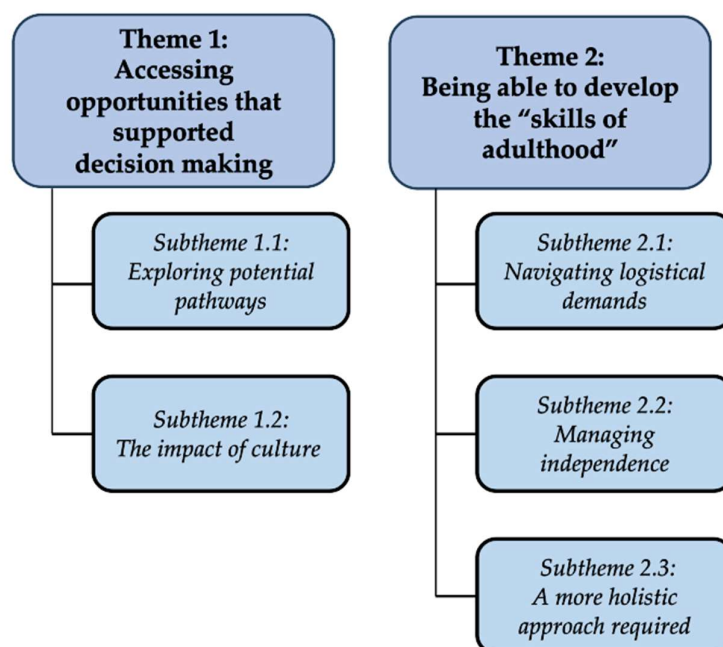


Figure 1. Visual representation of themes and subthemes.

3.1. Theme 1: Accessing Opportunities That Supported Decision Making

The first theme involves the participants identifying that exploring potential pathways (subtheme 1.1) helped to support their transition to post-school life. These explorations also enabled them to make informed decisions about their future pathways. The participants reflected on how being empowered to explore multiple options when making decisions about their futures was the most helpful. They also stated that, when this did not occur, it impacted their decision making. The participants also shared how the impact of culture (subtheme 1.2), or the values, beliefs, and social interactions within some of their families, schools, and communities, was more helpful in supporting their explorations of future pathways.

3.1.1. Exploring Potential Pathways

Most participants discussed how being empowered to explore multiple potential pathways during their transition to post-school life was helpful, as this enabled them to make informed decisions about their transition. They highlighted the importance of being aware of, and being able to access, opportunities, as this meant that they were more likely to make decisions that led to appropriate post-school pathways. For example, Maree discussed how it was helpful to know that there were multiple post-school pathways that she could pursue: “If you don’t get into the course you want, there’s still options”. For a few participants, the opportunity to access specialist programs to support their transition (such as university experience programs or university access programs) was helpful. This was because it enabled them to safely explore future pathways and to make informed decisions, which increased their certainty about post-school options and reduced transition-related anxiety. For Helen, access to a special recommendation program (the school supported her university application through the provision of a special recommendation) was helpful, as it reduced the uncertainty that she felt about making decisions relating to her transition: “As long as I have the special recommendation, I am not too worried”. For Maree, this

involved accessing a special university experience program, which also helped her to make more informed decisions about future pathways: “[I] went and did a week-long course down at the university to see if I was interested and I kind of was like, well, not really”.

The participants consistently shared how being empowered to make their own decisions when exploring post-school opportunities helped to support their transition to post-school life. They discussed how this empowerment was effective, as it enabled the identification of their individual interests and helped them to find deeper meaning in their next steps. For example, Jon was more certain about what he was transitioning to and what he hoped to achieve by doing so because he was empowered to pursue something that interested him: “I chose nursing at the time because I wanted to help people and there was an aspect of learning about health which I was interested in”. However, several participants discussed how missing opportunities to access activities and experiences that would have supported their informed decision making was not helpful in supporting their transition. For example, Tilly felt that her opportunities to explore different options were limited by others: “The popular, smart kids or the ones that were more extroverted, they were the ones that were grouped together and doing different academic based activities . . . I was just left to my own devices”. Mark experienced very limited access to exploring options and alternative post-school pathways, as, when he was in Year 11, he was placed on an alternative pathway by his school. This determined his post-school transition to TAFE, and Mark felt that this was the only pathway that was available to him: “I feel there wasn’t a choice made, the choices were made for me and not the [other] way around because of my results and how I did and that type of thing”.

Some participants discussed how the strong focus that they had to place on the academic aspects of their lives in their final years of school was not helpful, as it impacted their opportunity to fully explore other post-school options. Multiple participants described how transition planning largely focused on the academic aspects of their lives. For Kim, the teacher responsible for discussing post-school options focused on grades, practising for tests, and the process of applying for university. Kim did not find this effective and would have found an approach in which schools “tap into student interests and strengths and look for post-schooling options that could work for them and also work with external agencies that can provide supports in that area” more helpful. Multiple participants also recalled exploring only future academic pathways and being explicitly aware of how school results would impact access to those pathways. For Maree, this meant that time with the guidance officer was limited in its effectiveness, as it was largely spent on academic discussions: “We’d kind of go to her and discuss what course we were looking at and she’d look at all our subjects and how we were doing in them and how kind of give us a rough idea of based on our results and how that would look. But that’s about it”. Likewise, Tia felt that a more helpful approach would have enabled her to explore “not just unis . . . I feel maybe we could have spent time together looking at different other opportunities”. Many participants felt that this academic focus limited their opportunity to engage in effective transition preparation. This was because this focus meant that, to identify alternative opportunities, some participants had to “go down rabbit holes . . . [to] just figure it out” (Julie).

3.1.2. The Impact of Culture

Most participants discussed how the culture (the values, beliefs, priorities, and social interactions) across the multiple groups to which they belonged was helpful or not helpful in supporting their access to opportunities during their transition. This culture was identified as less helpful for participants from non-metropolitan Australia, where opportunities were felt to be reserved for certain groups to which the participants did not belong. For example, Tilly felt that the culture in the regional town in which she attended secondary school was not helpful, as it reserved the ability to go to a metropolitan area to pursue further education for “the super smart kids”. Tilly also felt that her school excluded her from opportunities because it did not value her quiet demeanour: “I was showing the school obviously some promise that I was capable, yet I wasn’t given opportunities because I wasn’t the extrovert”.

Luke felt his school did not value his intellectual ability, and he felt that he had to move from his regional town to the city to pursue future pathways. These participants had strong aspirations for their futures, but they felt that the culture of various groups was not helpful, as it limited their opportunities. In contrast, several metropolitan participants discussed how the supportive culture of their schools was helpful, as it increased their confidence and knowledge of their post-school options. For example, for Jon, support from two teachers “improved my confidence”. For Clare, conversations with supportive teachers enabled her to gain an “indication on, okay, that’s what I’ll do. That’s what I won’t do”.

The influence of family culture on preparation for, and completing, transitions was regularly discussed by the participants. For some, this culture was helpful in supporting their transition, as it empowered them to explore their post-school options. For example, Maree’s mother created an environment in which Maree felt supported to explore various pathways so that she could find one that would make her happy, safe, and secure. Likewise, it was through her mother that Kim was able to access guidance in setting goals for her post-school plans. Helen felt that her family “just did everything” to support her exploration of future options. However, for other participants, the culture of their families was not as helpful for the transition. Julie discussed her family as not being “the academic type”, so she accessed support for potential academic pathways through people outside her immediate family. Jon stated that he received no support from his family, and Tilly “had always wanted to go to university when I was young, but sadly family told me that I wasn’t smart enough to be able to do that”.

3.2. Theme 2: Being Able to Develop the “Skills of Adulthood”

The second theme explores the skills of adulthood that the participants identified as being helpful as they transitioned from school to post-school life. The participants emphasised that transition supports that enabled them to be prepared for navigating logistical demands (subtheme 2.1) of adulthood and for managing independence (subtheme 2.2) were the most helpful. However, the participants felt that they had not always been able to access supports that were effective in helping them to develop the skills needed to manage these post-school demands. Finally, the participants shared their feelings that a more holistic approach is required (subtheme 2.3) to support the development of these skills, as this approach would be the most helpful.

3.2.1. Navigating Logistical Demands

The participants reflected that being supported in preparing to navigate the logistical demands that they encountered as they transitioned to post-school life was helpful. The importance of developing skills relating to securing housing, enrolling in and then navigating post-school education systems, dealing with government agencies, voting, finding and maintaining employment, managing finances, and paying taxes was regularly discussed. Furthermore, developing life skills such as housekeeping, shopping, eating on a regular and healthy schedule, maintaining healthy levels of exercise, and using public transport was regularly identified as important. Being supported to develop these skills was helpful, as it meant that the participants were more likely to be prepared to navigate some of the new demands that they encountered in their post-school lives. However, for many participants, the support that they received to develop skills to enable them to meet these logistical demands was not effective. Helen felt: “I was not prepared for a lot of things that came with like, life”. For some participants, a lack of preparation for the logistical demands of adulthood led to serious outcomes, including major debt and mental and physical health impacts. The participants used words such as “anxious” (Maree, Helen, and Kim), “terrifying” (Clare and Julie), “scary” (Clare), and “nervous” (Clare, Helen, and Jon) to describe their discomfort. For some participants, helpful support was provided to prepare for the logistical demands of adulthood through families and friends. For Maree, this included, “driving around and be like, oh, that’s the bus you’ll take to Uni”. Families and friends provided helpful support by assisting the participants to develop skills in

administrative tasks, including enrolment and job applications and general organisation. Families and friends also accompanied the autistic young person on outings to increase familiarity and modelled how to navigate complex government systems. However, for other participants, such as Tilly, there was no support: “So, it was just a learning of, I guess I had to learn by my own mistakes”.

Additional unique challenges were identified by the non-metropolitan participants who accessed post-secondary options situated away from home. For example, Tilly described the logistical demands associated with moving from her small country town, such as navigating rental contracts and managing finances, as “overwhelming . . . the expense of moving to a big city and the overwhelmed feeling of going from a small town out to a big metropolitan area”. She felt that it would have been helpful to have had more financial support, as this may have helped her to overcome some of the logistical challenges that she encountered when completing the transition, as well as a greater understanding of the “legalities and the long-term implications of what could happen when you look at finance”. Luke also described the financial barriers that he encountered while transitioning, stating, “My mum wasn’t able to help me financially”. He also described some of the additional challenges that he encountered when he moved to the city to access further education: “Well the main challenges were logistical . . . just finding somewhere to live and understanding if I could afford it or not to rent”. However, he was able to overcome some of these barriers, as he “had some assistance from their [friends’] parents in terms of making the trip down to Brisbane and looking around for places [to live]”.

3.2.2. Managing Independence

Many participants described a transition that had to be largely “self-driven” (Luke), as the support that they received to develop the skills needed to manage their new-found independence was ineffective. For many participants, this meant that it was often necessary to independently prepare for, and then navigate, the transition. Many participants were resourceful in locating their own helpful supports to assist them in developing independence, or they developed these skills in ad hoc ways. Several conducted their own research and devised innovative methods to engage in their own preparations. For example, Jon completed free online courses, Julie researched online, and Clare used social media to develop independence in preparation for her move to university:

Yeah, I remember it probably started in Year 11, I would start following the pages on Facebook and all that and seeing all the events they were doing and then making a mental note of that . . . I was always looking on Reddit, I was joining Facebook groups and just getting all this informal information from people who are currently at university. So that once I got to the university, I already knew the rundown of everything and it wasn’t a shock to me.

Likewise, Helen engaged in roleplay using the computer game *The Sims*:

I made a character that was essentially supposed to represent me, went by a slightly different name and I made her exactly who I wanted to be in the future. And by seeing my Sim succeed, I felt more comfortable feeling like I would succeed, if that makes sense.

Some participants reported that they developed helpful skills that supported the management of their independence incidentally. Paid work, volunteering, or work experience exposed the participants to new interactions and environments, which supported them in developing strategies that helped them to manage their independence. For Luke, working as a shop assistant “exposed me to a bit of dealing with people I didn’t know, members of the public, in that kind of environment”. For Tilly, working as a barmaid for her neighbour was helpful, as it enabled her “to go and do different things . . . sure, I might’ve been pouring a drink, but I got to speak to someone else that I would never have spoken to before . . . it gave me that practice, I guess”.

3.2.3. A More Holistic Approach Required

All participants shared their ideas as to how a more “holistic approach” (Julie) to transition support would have been helpful, as it would have enabled them to more effectively develop these “skills of adulthood”. The participants felt that their transition preparation was not comprehensive and that this limited its effectiveness. Tia recalled: “The focus was all just on the last 2 years, final 2 years’ focus was on academic achievement, not really about all the other things you need to learn about, know about, as a young adult”. Clare agreed, wishing that she had been better prepared for all the demands of post-school life. This included developing workplace skills and knowledge of “how to support yourself during hard times, what is and isn’t appropriate, and just other life skills”.

The participants explained that this more holistic approach to transition supports would be helpful and effective because it would specifically include the provision of affirming support for the social changes that occur at the transition to post-school life. All participants discussed how they felt unprepared for the social changes that occurred after the transition to their new post-school lives, including personal relationships, work relationships, and interactions with university staff. This included not being “prepared for my first serious relationship” (Luke), being “really worried about interacting with people” (Kim), describing that “it was very hard for me to fit in” (Jon), “really struggling to make new friends” (Clare), and feeling “really lonely” (Julie). Seven participants shared their belief that the provision of affirming social support would have helped to make the social transition to post-school life more successful. This social support should be provided in safe and affirming ways. Julie emphasised that this support should involve “not being taught social skills, because autistic people have their own selection of social skills”. Instead, it should involve opportunities for autistic young people to practise and refine their own approaches to social interaction by engaging in enjoyable activities with their peers. For example, for Maree:

If I had have been able to go to a group and we could have all sat around practising, introducing ourselves, learning . . . the give and take of social speech and stuff like that and how not to come on too strong, but introduce yourself and try to make a friend or know when it’s inappropriate or appropriate to stuff like that would’ve been helpful.

However, Helen noted: “I feel like a lot of that communication would’ve been really useful, actually, like learning how to make connections and stuff like that”. She ideally would like learning to not be exclusive to autistic students: “I don’t think many people at our school actually knew how to talk to people, if that makes sense”.

Finally, several participants specified that they believe that the most helpful person to provide holistic transition support would be an autistic person with lived experience of the same transition. They believed that this would be effective, as it would allow them to develop skills while being supported by someone with lived experience of the transition. Tia believed that an autistic mentor would be able to provide “I guess, lived experience. [They could] come and share a bit about their story and how they navigate things . . . talk about how they cope with school and work and other things”. Jon described wanting access to an autistic mentor who shared his traits because that person would be the most appropriate to “help advise me on what my goals in life and career options would be”. Finally, Luke would like support to come from an autistic adult, as they could “show autistic kids that you can be successful”.

4. Discussion

This is the first study to explore and compare what autistic adults who attended secondary school in metropolitan and non-metropolitan parts of Australia report to be helpful and effective in supporting their transitioning from secondary school to post-school life. It also aimed to identify any additional supports that the participants felt may have aided their transition. The contributions from the participants in this study led to the identification of what could be helpful and effective ways to support autistic students from

across Australia as they transition to post-school life. The first main theme—accessing opportunities that supported decision making—aligns with findings from the United States of America (USA) identifying the importance of supporting autistic young people in leading decisions about their transition to post-school life [39], suggesting that these are also relevant for autistic young people in Australia. The current study further highlights that autistic students should be supported to explore multiple post-school pathways and empowered to make well-informed decisions. The second theme—being able to develop the “skills of adulthood”—shows that, like autistic students in the USA [26], Australian autistic young people wish to be prepared to engage in “real-life” experiences during transition preparations. The current study also identified that a holistic, neurodiversity-affirming approach to preparing autistic students for transition should include supporting the development of the broad range of skills needed to succeed in adult life. Whilst these findings are consistent for autistic young people attending school in non-metropolitan parts of Australia, this study identified that the impact of local cultures and the logistical barriers encountered may be even greater for them than for their metropolitan peers. Therefore, autistic young people from non-metropolitan Australia may need additional, tailored support to successfully transition to post-school life.

4.1. How Autistic Students Want to Be Supported before, during, and Shortly after Their Transition to Post-School Life

4.1.1. Empower Informed Decision Making

The participants in the current study discussed how being provided with the opportunity to explore multiple future options, by, for example, gaining access to specialist programs and by not being restricted to explorations of academic pathways, was helpful in preparing for the transition. This provision supported them to make more informed decisions about their futures, as it allowed them to identify their interests and to take more relevant and meaningful next steps. The autistic adults also identified how being enabled to exercise self-determination during their transition to post-school life was helpful, as it helped them to make better informed decisions about post-school pathways. This study finding is reflective of previous research on the topic of post-school transition planning for autistic students; previous research has shown that autistic young people often experience poor transition planning due to it lacking options [40], which can lead to reduced opportunity to engage in meaningful post-school activities [41]. The autistic adults in this study reported that being given the opportunity to explore multiple appropriate post-school pathways and being empowered to lead decision making during their transition were the most helpful, as this enabled them to find future pathways that were suitable and appropriate. However, when this self-determination was not enabled, the participants reported that post-school pathways were not as suitable or appropriate. This is consistent with the findings of previous research (e.g., Strnadová et al. [42]), which has shown that the involvement of autistic students and students with an intellectual disability in discussions and decisions about their transition to adulthood is crucial for transition success. Furthermore, within the broader disability literature, it is widely agreed that empowering people with disabilities to make decisions on matters that impact their lives is best practice [43]. Within autism-specific research, it has been shown that supporting opportunities for autistic adults to exercise this self-determination is important, as it is a necessary component to promote quality of life [44]. In practice, this means that schools, families, and communities should ensure that autistic young people are empowered to make their own informed decisions about these next steps, as the current study shows this to be a necessary component of supporting a successful transition to post-school life.

4.1.2. Plan Holistically Using a Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach

Within the current study, the participants identified that being supported to develop “the skills of adulthood” was helpful, as these skills were necessary for a successful transition to post-school life. This highlights that effective transition support should not focus

solely on the academic aspects of autistic young people's lives but, instead, should be holistic and take a neurodiversity-affirming approach. All participants in the current study experienced some difficulty in navigating the logistical demands and independence of post-school life. The existing literature exploring autistic young people's future attitudes has identified that these changes are anticipated by autistic youth many years before the transition [45]. As such, this study not only reiterates what is already known about the importance of early transition planning [46] but also emphasises the importance of this planning being holistic in focus. The findings of this study suggest that this approach supports autistic young people in developing independence and building skills that help to manage the logistical challenges of adulthood.

This study also shows that, to increase its effectiveness, part of this holistic planning should focus on preparing autistic young people for the social exchanges required in their adult lives. All participants in this study discussed being underprepared for the social changes that they encountered. Difficulty within social situations is reported by some autistic adults in post-school life [6]. The participants in the current study discussed the helpfulness of being provided with affirming support to develop skills in navigating the complexities of adult social exchanges. Some participants specifically stated that this support should not be in the form of social skills training, which is reflective of the broader body of research on social skills training for autistic adults [47]. This research shows that autistic adults do want support with social communication but that social skills training often fails to provide this desired kind of support; in fact, some autistic adults feel that social skills training is unnecessary or not helpful [47]. Reflecting this research, the participants in this study identified that support should take a neurodiversity-affirming approach. This approach involves prioritising well-being by ensuring that the focus of the support is on affirming neurodivergent experiences and that it honours and respects autistic communication [48,49]. Researchers have reported that, in school settings, there are many examples of approaches to support that are not neurodiversity-affirming, including those that disregard autistic students' lived experiences and that aim to unnecessarily modify autistic communication [49]. Consistent with prior research exploring the importance of taking a neurodiversity-affirming approach to supporting autistic people, participants in this study have shown that effectively preparing autistic students for the social transition to post-school life should not involve these previously reported non-neurodiversity-affirming practices. Instead, it should ensure the respectful provision of relevant supports. These supports should acknowledge an individual's needs within the context of their experiences [50,51]. The participants in the current study were also clear that autistic young adults should be provided with the support of autistic role models as part of an affirming approach to transition preparation. This is consistent with the findings across many aspects of autism research showing that the purposeful seeking of autistic adults' lived experiences can help to more deeply understand autistic experiences [52]. Therefore, providing access to autistic role models to guide and inspire autistic young adults as they prepare to transition to post-school life should be considered best practice.

4.2. Additional Considerations for Supporting Autistic Students from Non-Metropolitan Areas

The current study shows that transition supports provided or offered to the participants who were students in non-metropolitan areas were not always as helpful and effective, as they did not always consider the cultures of the schools and communities or the additional logistical barriers that these students encountered. This is consistent with the wider body of literature that reports on the post-school aspirations of youth in regional Australia, who often have strong aspirations for their futures but are limited in their ability to achieve them [53]. This is often due to unequal access to resources and limitations on their cultural capital (or the ideas and preferences that can be used in social actions within their community [53]). This limitation on cultural capital means that young people from non-metropolitan areas may not be encouraged, supported, or even expected to access certain post-school opportunities [54]. The current study shows that this also can be true

for autistic young people living in these non-metropolitan areas. While these participants were aspirational about their futures, the cultures of their communities and schools were sometimes less helpful in successfully supporting their transition to post-school life. Therefore, future policy relating to supporting autistic young people's transition to post-school life must acknowledge the additional impact of culture on students in non-metropolitan Australia, and it should support communities, schools, and families to find ways to ensure that these autistic young people have increased access to suitable post-school pathways.

The current study also highlights that, for these non-metropolitan participants, there were additional logistical supports that needed to be considered to enable their effective transition. The non-metropolitan participants discussed the logistical barriers that they encountered, which highlights the need for more helpful support in overcoming these challenges. These were discussed particularly in relation to their need to relocate to access post-school opportunities and to the financial challenges that they encountered during their transition. This finding is reflective of the broader research on non-autistic rural students completing the transition to university, which has shown that these students encounter many additional geographical and financial barriers [55,56]. These young people often must relocate to access post-school options; for those who remain, there may be limited options for post-school employment and greater difficulty in accessing the facilities required to undertake tasks associated with adulthood [18]. However, it is known that autistic young people can experience difficulties accessing the specialist services required to help them develop the skills needed to overcome these challenges [4]. Therefore, the findings of this study show that these difficulties in accessing specialist services may have an even greater impact during an autistic young person's transition to post-school life, as this is a time when they encounter increased logistical complications that may impact their successful transition. Therefore, future policymakers must be aware of the additional barriers present for autistic young people in non-metropolitan areas and consider how to provide additional support to ensure equitable access to transition support.

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to consider the limitations of this study. Within the sample, there was a small number of participants from non-metropolitan Australia. However, the percentage of these participants (40%) is higher than the percentage of Australians currently living outside metropolitan areas (27.8%) [57]. Like many interview studies, the sample size is modest. Modest sample sizes are often present in interview studies focusing on the post-school transition for autistic students (e.g., Bell et al. [58]; Essex and Melham [59]; Matthews et al. [60]; and Pillay et al. [61]). Furthermore, as per Malterud et al. [62], given the study's aim, the sample specificity, the strength of the dialogue within the interviews, and the in-depth analysis method, the research team deemed the contribution of the 10 participants sufficient for the information provided to be considered strong. Importantly, despite 70% of the participants having left school over 10 years ago, the findings are consistent with those of previous research in this area (e.g., Hagner et al. [39] and Hatfield et al. [26]). However, it may be advisable for future research to limit participation to more recently graduated autistic young people to identify whether there are notable differences in the supports that they identify as helpful and effective.

Over two-thirds of the participants were female, which is disproportionate in relation to the current suggested autism gender ratio [63] but reflective of many studies that recruited autistic adults online (e.g., Ahmed et al. [64]). Furthermore, of all participants, 70% reported their ethnicity as White, which is slightly greater than the average proportion of White participants represented in autism research from 1990 to 2017 (i.e., 64.8%) [65]. Research on the impact of gender and ethnicity on the transition to adulthood for all young people has shown that students from marginalised populations are more likely to experience additional challenges during this time and that the experience of non-White young people may be further complicated [66]. The same research found that economically disadvantaged young people may experience the greatest challenge in assuming adult

roles in their post-school lives [66]. As the current study did not seek to identify the socioeconomic status of the participants, it is unclear how this may have impacted what has been discovered about transition support. Therefore, it is important to note that these sample characteristics may impact the generalisability of the findings.

This study identified several important considerations that policymakers could address when implementing guidelines for schools to use when supporting autistic young people transitioning from secondary school. This is particularly relevant given the recent recommendations to the Australian government that students with a disability should have access to dedicated transition services to assist their move to post-school life [31]. Specifically, this study shows that consideration must be given to the pathways that are available to autistic young people and the types of supports that are prioritised while preparing for the transition. This would allow for greater precision in the allocation of resources to families, schools, and communities to support the transition. However, it is important to note that the voices of parents and school staff are absent from the findings of this study. Earlier research has shown that partnership between home and school is key to transition success and that the best outcomes for autistic young people transitioning to post-school life are achieved when home and school collaboratively empower them to lead their own transition journey [7]. When there is a disconnect between stakeholders, transition planning is less effective and can lead to poorer outcomes [22]. Therefore, future research should seek to gain the views of parents and school staff regarding what they consider important when supporting autistic young people's transition to post-school life. This is likely to support effective collaboration during this important time. Finally, this study was co-designed with members of autistic and autism communities, enabling it to make a contribution to the body of literature on post-school transition for autistic young people that authentically represents autistic experiences [30]. Future researchers should aim to take this co-production approach, as this will ensure that research in this area continues to authentically represent the experiences of autistic young people as they transition to post-school life.

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