

## Media Release

### Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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## World of higher education becoming a better place for students on the autism spectrum

The University of Tasmania is breaking new ground in how to better support students on the autism spectrum in tertiary education and its leadership in this area has been recognised with two significant grants.

Coinciding with World Autism Awareness Day today and World Autism Month in April, the University has received \$30,000 in funding from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) for an innovative multi-disciplinary research project that explores the unique experiences of a growing population of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The School of Architecture & Design's Acting Head Dr Ceridwen Owen will be chief investigator and will be joined by University colleagues Damhnat McCann from the School of Health Sciences, Dr Christopher Rayner from the Faculty of Education, Dr Lyndsay Quarmby from the Centre for Rural Health and Carol Devereaux and Fiona Sheehan from Disability Services.

The project is also supported by Mary Brake, autism consultant from the Department of Education, and Darlene McLennan, manager of the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Disability and Education.

One of the key aspects of the project is to investigate the impact of the built environment on the experience of students with ASD.

"The design of the built environment is not often considered as part of a framework of support," Dr Owen said.

"However, people with Autism Spectrum Disorder can experience many difficulties including sensory overload and confusion in navigating even apparently familiar environments.

"Even what most people think of as the quiet, calming environment of a library can be overwhelming for someone on the autism spectrum and affect their ability to study.

“We can’t solve everything through design, but we need to understand how the built environment impacts on their experience and where we can make changes to make it easier for students with autism spectrum disorder to more fully participate in academic and social life at university.”

The study will involve current students with ASD at the University who will record their experiences using photovoice, where data is gathered through photographs taken by the participants combined with in-depth interviews. The study will also investigate holistic disability support models and innovations in learning and teaching to support students on the autism spectrum.

The University of Tasmania’s Centre for University Pathways and Programs (CUPP) has received \$40,000 from the Department of Education which will also go towards improving the education experience for autistic students who are transitioning into university.

Darlene McLennan, who is the National Disability Coordination Officer for CUPP, said that the transition to university from secondary school can be challenging for many new students, but for someone on the autism spectrum this transition can be even more difficult.

“Often in the early stages it just becomes too much and the student drops out of their course,” she said.

“We are very excited that a new resource to support students on the autism spectrum will be developed through the National Disability Coordination Programme (NDCO) hosted by the University of Tasmania in the north of Tasmania and Mission Australia in the south.”

Helpful Hints on Transition to Tertiary Studies will be a detailed, step-by-step guide that offers practical advice students can use to help navigate and cope with their new learning environment.

An advisory committee of leading experts in supporting students with autism in the tertiary sector has been formed to provide input and feedback on the resource development.

This includes representation from Latrobe, ANU and Curtin, NSW and Victorian TAFE system and the Autism Cooperative Research Centre.

It includes strategies on communication in tutorials, effective study techniques, exam preparation, and peer relationships.

“We are confident that it will not only be useful for students, but will also be a valuable tool for educators and parents,” Darlene said.

**Information released by:**

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