

Beyond the “service cliff”: experiences of an inclusive postschool transition program for autistic youth with intellectual disability

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Abstract

Purpose – Autistic youth with intellectual disability (ID) are underrepresented in transition research and services, particularly in programs that prioritize social inclusion, emotional wellbeing and autonomy. This study explores stakeholder experiences of Campus Life, an inclusive, postschool transition program designed specifically for autistic youth with ID.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study drew on multiple stakeholder perspectives. Accessible, visually supported surveys were completed by four autistic participants. Survey data from participants were analyzed descriptively to capture their priorities at program entry. In-depth interviews were conducted with six parents, and eight staff participated in focus groups or individual interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to generate key themes across parent and staff data.

Findings – Participant surveys revealed interest in friendship and enjoyable activities, with more varied interest in work or further learning. Thematic analysis of parent and staff data generated four themes: (1) a supportive and structured environment, (2) growing into independence, (3) finding confidence in connection and (4) uncertain future access to a valued opportunity. Stakeholders perceived Campus Life as promoting psychological safety, social growth and autonomy in ways not commonly achieved through traditional employment-focused models.

Originality/value – This is one of the few studies to foreground the experiences of autistic youth with ID within a postschool transition program. It highlights the importance of holistic, person-centered supports that extend beyond employment to address broader developmental and social goals. The findings support rethinking what successful transition can look like for this population.

Keywords Autism, Youth, Transition, Intellectual disability, Post-school

Paper type Research paper

(Information about the authors can be found at the end of this article.)

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Background

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a pivotal developmental stage that demands young people navigate new social roles, responsibilities and environments. This transition also requires adjustments in identity as individuals encounter shifting expectations of what it means to be an adult (Arnett, 2004). For autistic youth, this transition is often fraught with barriers, including challenges related to mental health, executive functioning and inadequate support for fostering independence, meaningful social connection and employment readiness (Griffiths *et al.*, 2016; Pillay *et al.*, 2022; Sullivan *et al.*, 2024; Wong *et al.*, 2020). These challenges are compounded by the abrupt drop off in services after school – often termed the “service cliff” – which leaves autistic youth and their families to navigate critical developmental transitions with minimal formal support (Anderson *et al.*, 2018; Ishler *et al.*, 2022; Laxman *et al.*, 2019; Roux *et al.*, 2015; Wolpe *et al.*, 2023).

Although researchers have studied ways to support autistic youth transitioning to adulthood for decades, much of this work has focused on outcomes related to postsecondary education and employment (e.g. [Cai and Richdale, 2016](#); [Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015](#); [Wehman et al., 2020](#); [Wong et al., 2020](#)). In a recent systematic review, [White, Adams et al. \(2024\)](#) found that many transition programs adopt a narrow view of adulthood centered on economic productivity, with far less attention paid to the social and emotional dimensions of adult life or the diverse ways in which success and independence may be defined. This is particularly concerning given that autistic adults report high levels of loneliness – not simply a lack of social interaction, but an unmet need for belonging and acceptance – an issue strongly associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation ([Grace et al., 2022](#); [Love et al., 2025](#)). In addition to these systemic gaps, autistic youth and their families may hold differing expectations about adulthood. Although many autistic youths envision futures centered around meaningful careers, relationships and autonomy, their families often experience heightened uncertainty and concern about how to support these aspirations while managing increased caregiving demands ([Curtiss et al., 2021](#); [Lee et al., 2022](#)).

Despite estimates that 18–50% of autistic people have an intellectual disability (ID) ([Christensen et al., 2019](#); [Dunn et al., 2019](#); [Khachadourian et al., 2023](#); [Maenner et al., 2020](#)), transition research has disproportionately focused on autistic youth without ID ([White, Adams et al., 2024](#)). This is also the case across autism research more broadly where studies have rarely included autistic people with ID as active participants ([Gibbs et al., 2024](#); [Russell et al., 2019](#)). This exclusion reinforces a pattern of systemic neglect in both research and policy ([Russell et al., 2019](#); [Thurm et al., 2022](#)) and reflects a critical gap in both scholarship and practice, one that demands urgent attention.

To the best of our knowledge, no research has specifically examined transition programs designed exclusively for autistic youth with ID that adopt a holistic approach to supporting their wellbeing, social participation, and self-determination. Existing programs, such as Project SEARCH ([Romualdez et al., 2020](#); [Sung et al., 2023](#); [Wehman et al., 2020](#); [Whittenburg et al., 2020](#)), incorporate autistic youth with ID alongside other disability groups but are primarily structured around employment outcomes, emphasizing skill-building in workforce readiness, independent living, and work-based learning. While these programs are valuable, they reflect a narrow definition of transition success, one that may not necessarily address the priorities and needs of autistic youth with ID. Without targeted research on alternative programs, autistic youth with ID remain excluded, not only from transition services that reflect their lived experiences but also from the very research that informs these programs, further reinforcing their systemic marginalization.

Current study

This qualitative study examined the experiences and perceived impacts of Campus Life, a post-school transition program designed for autistic youth with ID. We analyzed self-reported survey data from participants to capture their initial priorities, and gathered qualitative data from parents and staff reflecting on the young people's experiences after 12 months in the program. Specifically, we asked:

- What do participant-reported perspectives reveal about their initial interests and priorities as they begin the transition to adulthood?
- How do parents and staff perceive the experiences and impacts of an inclusive post-secondary transition program for autistic youth with ID?

Method

Campus life

The Campus Life program (<https://inclusivesupports.org.au>) is a structured three-year program designed for autistic youth with ID aged 17–25 transitioning from school to adulthood. The program operates on post-secondary education campuses in South East Queensland, Australia, and provides an inclusive, dynamic adult learning environment. The program follows a progressive three-year approach designed to build on participants' strengths and interests while supporting their transition to adulthood. In the first half, participants have opportunities to develop and refine their social and communication skills in ways that align with their individual preferences, alongside exploring foundational concepts in business. The second half focuses on expanding participants' work-related skills and experiences, providing access to meaningful, interest-based work placements. There is a rolling exit from the program considering individual capacity and needs. Those who require further support transition into another program that facilitates individualized pathways to employment, supporting participants in establishing a microbusiness or developing workplace skills in an environment suited to their goals and strengths.

Campus Life is primarily funded through Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) (www.ndis.gov.au/understanding/how-ndis-works), which provides individualized funding to eligible Australians with disabilities to access necessary supports and services. Participants typically use their NDIS plans to cover the cost of attending the program, including funding for therapeutic supports and inclusion assistants (also referred to as support workers).

Campus Life operates across multiple locations, with each site supporting one or two cohorts of approximately six to eight participants. The program operates from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM, with 1:1 or 1:2 support provided depending on individual needs. Participants attend two days a week, and a typical day follows a structured but flexible schedule that balances individualized learning, group activities and therapeutic supports:

- *Morning:* Participants begin with a story and sharing activity, where they reflect on their feelings and experiences. This is followed by business studies, providing structured learning adapted to individual needs and passion projects led by the individuals in areas of learning that interest them.
- *Mid-morning:* After morning tea in the dining area, participants engage in a physical activity session (such as an exercise class) on one day and group music therapy on another day.
- *Afternoon:* After lunch, participants take part in either an interactive presentation on current affairs and entertainment news or a group communication module designed to build confidence and social engagement.
- *End of the day:* The day concludes with participants sharing highlights of the day through visual stories and engaging in fun group activities and games to reinforce social connections.

Campus Life initially launched at one site, with grant funding facilitating its expansion to two additional locations. This study focused on participants from these expanded sites, particularly examining the experiences of a new cohort in their first year of the program. The research was tied to a two-year grant, meaning only one year of participant data was collected to allow sufficient time for ethics approval, data analysis, and reporting. While the primary focus was on this first-year cohort, staff also reflected on the progress of participants who had recently completed the full three-year program, offering insight into the longer-term impacts of Campus Life.

Procedure

We obtained ethics approval from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (2023/835). We designed REDCap surveys for each participant group: (1) parents of Campus Life participants, (2) Campus Life staff, and (3) Campus Life participants. We asked parents and staff to provide background information about themselves, and for parents, details about their child as well.

Recognizing the limited availability of data directly from autistic adults with ID (Gibbs *et al.*, 2024), we made a concerted effort to include their perspectives. We developed a REDCap survey specifically for autistic youth with ID, incorporating multiple accessibility features based on Nicolaidis *et al.* (2020). These included plain English, paired text and visuals where possible, and a text-to-voice function. We piloted the survey with our multidisciplinary research team, which included researchers specializing in autism, intellectual disability, and broader disability studies. This process led to refinements such as additional visuals, larger font sizes, “I don’t know” response options, and a simplified response format. We then piloted the revised survey with two parents of autistic youth with ID and a speech pathologist experienced in supporting this cohort. Their feedback prompted further modifications, particularly to the participant information and consent form (e.g. adjustments to color contrast and readability).

We shared recruitment materials, including survey links, with the General Manager of the Campus Life program (K.H.). Survey links for the parents and Campus Life participants were then distributed by email to the parents by K.H.. Parents were also provided a preview of the survey designed for Campus Life participants so they could assist their child in making an informed decision if required. However, we clearly stated that participation was voluntary and ultimately the decision of the Campus Life participants themselves. We invited Campus Life staff to participate via direct email from K.H.. As recruitment materials were distributed by the program’s General Manager in accordance with our ethics approval, the research team was not informed of how many individuals were approached or declined to participate. Given that Campus Life participants were aged 17–25 and had varying support needs, we sought to balance the provision of decision-making support with respect for participant autonomy. We also acknowledge the ethical considerations involved in including parental reports about the experiences of autistic youth with intellectual disability and positioned these accounts as complementary perspectives rather than proxies for participants’ own views.

Participants

We recruited parents of Campus Life participants ($n=6$) as well as staff members ($n=8$). Table 1 presents demographic information for parents and staff. Staff had been employed in the Campus Life program for an average of two years and three months (range: 1–3 years) and worked in direct support roles, providing personalized learning assistance, facilitating group activities, and supporting participants’ social engagement and daily basic needs.

Parents provided information about their autistic children who were aged 17–25, all of whom had been diagnosed with co-occurring intellectual disability. All were male, and most ($n=5$) were White, with one described as South East Asian. Participants were reported to have a range of other co-occurring conditions, which included attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD, $n=4$), anxiety ($n=1$), sleep disorder ($n=1$) and eating disorder ($n=1$). Most Campus Life participants attended special schools ($n=5$), with one attending a mainstream school. They exhibited varied communication abilities: half ($n=3$) were described as non-verbal, two used short phrases, and one spoke in full sentences. A subset of Campus Life participants ($n=4$) consented to participate in the study. However,

Table 1 Demographics for parents and staff

Characteristic	Parent (n = 6) n (%)	Staff (n = 8) n (%)
Average age	52 years (range: 42–64)	35 years (range: 24–47)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	6 (100)	5 (63)
Male	0 (0)	3 (38)
Nonbinary	0 (0)	0 (0)
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White	5 (83)	6 (75)
South East Asian	1 (17)	0 (0)
Aboriginal	0 (0)	1 (13)
Rather not say	0 (0)	1 (13)
<i>Education level</i>		
Year 12	1 (17)	2 (25)
Vocational certificate	2 (33)	2 (25)
Bachelor's degree	1 (17)	2 (25)
Master's degree or PhD	1 (17)	2 (25)
Other	1 (17)	0 (0)
Source(s): Authors' own work		

as their parents had already provided group-level data, individual-level details from these participants are not reported separately.

Data collection

Campus life participants. Campus Life participants completed accessible surveys prior to commencing the program in January/February 2024 ($n=4$). Two participants also completed follow-up surveys in 2025. The surveys included two visually supported sections and were identical at both time points. Section 1 focused on participants' weekly routines and emotional responses to activities (e.g. "What activities do you usually do on a Friday?" and "How do you feel about your Fridays?"). Section 2 explored areas of interest or need (e.g. "Do you want more friends?" and "Do you want to learn more new things?"). Each question was paired with visual prompts, and response options included "yes," "no" and "I don't know." Surveys were designed in consultation with professionals experienced in inclusive research methods to support accessibility for individuals with intellectual disability.

Parents. C.E. conducted one-on-one interviews with parents via video or phone call in two stages. In January/February 2024, C.E. conducted the first round of interviews to gather contextual information about each child, including parental hopes and expectations for the program. C.E. did not analyze these initial interviews but used the information provided to develop a tailored interview schedule for the second round in 2025. For example, if a parent initially described their child experiencing anxiety at school, the follow-up interview included questions about whether Campus Life provided a greater sense of security and engagement. In January/February 2025, C.E. conducted follow-up interviews to examine how parents viewed the program's impact on their child's daily life, independence, and wellbeing. These interviews also explored changes in participants' routines, relationships, and overall quality of life over the preceding 12 months. The interviews lasted an average of 23 min each.

Staff. Staff participated in either one of two focus groups or an individual interview in January/February 2025, sharing their perspectives on the program's impact over the preceding year. C.E. and R.Y.C facilitated the first focus group, which included four staff members and lasted 45 min. C.E. facilitated the second focus group with two staff members, also lasting 45 min. The two remaining staff members participated in individual interviews conducted by C.E., one

via Teams and one via email. Although the primary focus was on participants in their first year of the program, staff had worked with multiple cohorts and reflected on both current participants and those who had recently completed the full three-year program. As a result, discussions addressed not only immediate changes during the first year but also longer-term outcomes for previous participants. We asked staff about participants' progress in areas such as independence, relationships, and wellbeing. Staff also described challenges participants faced and the strategies they used to support them.

We recorded all interviews and focus groups using Otter.ai. Later, C.E. manually reviewed and updated each transcript while listening to the recordings to ensure accuracy. Parents and Campus Life participants received a \$50 (AUD) gift card after completing both rounds of data collection. Staff received a \$30 (AUD) gift card for participating in a focus group or individual interview. The supplemental material includes all questions we asked participants in January/February 2025.

Data analysis

Campus life participant data. We initially planned to conduct descriptive analyses of survey responses collected at two time points to explore changes in participants' social engagement and community participation over 12 months. However, with only two of the four participants completing the follow-up survey, this analysis was not feasible. Instead, we focused on responses from Section 2 of the initial survey, which contained structured, visually supported questions about participants' interests, goals, and areas of desired growth. These responses provided insight into what participants found meaningful as they began the program and offered a valuable starting point for understanding their priorities at the point of transition.

Parent and staff data. We analyzed the qualitative data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019), adopting an inductive approach guided by the data rather than predefined categories. At the semantic level, coding identified meaningful features, while latent coding examined broader interpretative patterns. We analyzed parent and staff (stakeholders) qualitative data together rather than as separate data sets because we were interested in both groups' perspectives on the same overarching phenomenon – the experiences and perceived impacts of Campus Life. Parents described participants' experiences from a home and community perspective, while staff shared observations from the structured Campus Life setting. Given the small sample size, analyzing these data sets together allowed us to develop a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the program's impact while preserving qualitative depth. We clustered similar codes to generate candidate themes and iteratively reviewed and refined them to enhance coherence and depth. Throughout this process, C.E., R.Y.C., A.L., and V.G. engaged in collaborative discussions, critically reflecting on the thematic structure and the influence of researcher positionality on interpretation. This reflexive approach ensured that the final themes remained firmly rooted in participants' experiences while acknowledging the researchers' active role in the analytic process.

Results

Campus life participant survey data

We first present the perspectives of Campus Life participants, as their responses provide important context for the qualitative findings from parents and staff. At the start of the program, three out of four participants expressed a desire for more social connections and engagement in fun activities, while half indicated they had an interest in activities related to social outings, independence, exercise, work, and learning new things. Some participants indicated uncertainty ("I don't know"), particularly regarding social outings, independent

Table 2 Campus life participant 2024 responses (*n* = 4)

Question	Yes	No	I don't know
Do you want more friends?	3	0	1
Do you want to go out more? (like the movies or to the shops)	2	0	2
Do you want to do more fun activities? (like music or playing games)	3	1	0
Do you want to do more things by yourself?	2	0	2
Do you want to do more exercise or sport?	2	2	0
Do you want to work or work more?	2	0	2
Do you want to learn more new things?	2	1	1

Source(s): Authors' own work

activities, and future work opportunities. Table 2 summarizes participants' self-reported interests and priorities at the start of the program in 2024.

Qualitative findings from stakeholders

Thematic analysis of qualitative data from stakeholders led to the generation of four themes that captured the experiences and perceived impacts of Campus Life: (1) A supportive and structured environment, (2) Growing into independence, (3) Finding confidence in connection, and (4) Uncertain future access to a valued opportunity. Themes 1–3 are represented in both staff and parent data, while Theme 4 is exclusively based on parent data. Quotes from parents are labeled with “P” followed by an identification number (P1–P6), while quotes from staff members are labeled with “S” and a corresponding number (S1–S8).

Theme 1: A supportive and structured environment

Stakeholders described Campus Life as a welcoming and accepting environment, allowing participants to engage at their own pace. Many participants had previously experienced distress and disengagement in educational or day program settings. One staff member reflected, “we’ve got quite a number of students who were school refusers, so who, during the last few years of their schooling, just refused to go back because they didn’t like it. They didn’t fit in” (S1). For some, these challenges persisted beyond school, “when he finished high school, he went into a day program. . . and it was a failure. . . (Mum) withdrew him from the program, and he was just sitting in his bedroom all day playing on his iPad” (S1). By contrast, stakeholders indicated that Campus Life created a sense of safety, leading to increased attendance and engagement. One parent reflected on their child’s shift from school refusal to active participation:

We had significant refusal in his last year, where he would refuse to go to school two or three times a week, and we haven’t had any refusal at Campus Life. He’s just been very happy to get in the car and head off. (P1)

Parents indicated that the staff’s approach was a defining factor in fostering a sense of safety. They emphasized the importance of having staff who understood and supported their children, “they work with him pretty well, and they understand him [...] we’ve had experiences in the past where people just don’t get people like him” (P2). Another parent highlighted the facilitators’ role in making their child feel comfortable, “to be honest with you, I don’t think he would have gone if they weren’t who they are, and really, really nice” (P6). This perception of safety was reflected in participants’ experiences, as one parent described, “they really want to help from the heart, and he really feels that everyone’s energy there is supporting him [...] he feels very safe there, I can tell” (P5).

Alongside this emotional safety, stakeholders highlighted the importance of structure and predictability in fostering engagement. One staff member shared how the program was “a

place for neurodiversity to be [...] [at] the forefront of how the day operates [...] fidget tools everywhere, they know exactly what's going to be happening throughout the day" (S8). Parents similarly valued this structure, with one explaining, "the structure of the program is excellent for him, because it's structured and he knows what's expected of him, and he knows what's coming [...] structure is really important in his life" (P1).

While the program emphasized consistency, there was also flexibility to accommodate individual needs. One staff member explained how this balance was achieved, "this is the activity we're gonna do at the moment [...] for the next hour, your level of involvement is kind of like, up to you" (S8). Parents recognized the importance of this approach in reducing pressure while still fostering engagement. One parent described how their child, who often struggled with change, adapted well to Campus Life's routine:

There's a good ebb and flow in the day [...] he knows we're gonna do some exercise, go and have morning tea, come back [...] he was in and out of the room at first, but now he knows he's not expected to be there all day. He's enjoying that. (P1)

Theme 2: Growing into independence

Stakeholders described how Campus Life fostered autonomy, enabling participants to take on everyday tasks with greater confidence and reducing their reliance on support workers and caregivers. Staff emphasized the importance of supporting decision-making rather than doing tasks for participants, explaining, "we're not there to help them buy their lunch [...] we're there to support them to do that for themselves" (S1). As participants became more confident in navigating public spaces and managing personal responsibilities, staff observed changes in their independence. One staff member described how a participant progressed from needing assistance to independently making purchases, "going to the front counter at shops now and serving himself [...] now he can do that independently" (S5). Parents also observed shifts in how their children were given opportunities to make "adult decisions now" (P4).

Campus Life was also perceived as fostering self-advocacy, encouraging participants to express their needs and preferences. One parent reflected on how their child was now more capable, "he finished high school having written work that was very clearly done hand-over-hand for him [...] Here, it's much more obvious that he can take the initiative himself" (P1). Staff and parents also described improvements in self-care and daily routines, with one participant developing greater self-awareness around hydration, "there was a participant that didn't drink any water throughout the day [...] and now, I didn't even need to tell him, he just goes and grabs a glass of water by himself" (S4). Similarly, another participant independently managed their morning routine, "got up, got dressed, had his breakfast [...] I didn't have to drag him out of bed, which is what I used to have to do" (P4).

Alongside increased autonomy, stakeholders described improvements in emotional regulation. While many participants experienced significant anxiety when starting the program, staff and parents observed that, over time, participants became more comfortable, flexible and emotionally regulated. One staff member reflected that a participant's "day-to-day anxiety levels [...] drastically dropped" (S8), while another described how one individual, who initially struggled with high levels of distress, became increasingly at ease within the program:

He couldn't stay in the room for more than 10 minutes [...] his anxiety was such that he would get aggressive and violent. He went from this young man who just had such high anxiety, to someone who would race into the room when he got there. And we were hearing from his support workers that in other situations, he was still showing those aggressive outbursts because he wasn't feeling safe, he wasn't feeling comfortable [...] We never saw that. (S1)

For some participants, emotional regulation was evident in their ability to communicate distress before it escalated. One staff member noted that instead of experiencing a sudden emotional outburst, a participant “can actually verbalize that or show you that before it actually becomes a big instance” (S3). Parents also described improvements in their children’s emotional wellbeing, with one parent observing that their child seemed “a bit more relaxed there too” (P4), while another noted that they “seem much calmer than last year” (P1).

Theme 3: Finding confidence in connection

Stakeholders indicated that Campus Life provided a space where participants could gradually build confidence in social interactions, transitioning from reserved or withdrawn behaviors to “communicating with confidence” (S2). Staff described how many participants initially struggled with social communication, often appearing quiet or anxious. Over time, as they became more comfortable, they showed greater willingness to interact with peers as they became “confident to be more social” (S6). One staff member reflected on this shift, stating that participants were “coming out of their shells [...] very reserved and quiet at the start and then sort of opening up and communicating more” (S5).

For some, this progression was particularly significant. One staff member recalled a participant who had previously exhibited high levels of social anxiety, explaining, “he was really, really anxious and he would – he wouldn’t even look at you – and now, you know, he’s really open. He comes to you and asks how you are. And that was a massive change” (S6). Parents also noted social changes, describing their children as becoming “a bit more social” (P4) and starting to “talk to the other participants more than he was” (P2).

Beyond building confidence, stakeholders also discussed how participants formed meaningful relationships, some for the first time in their lives. Staff described that “it’s really sweet to see this sense of camaraderie” (S7) among participants. For some participants, forming friendships was a major milestone. One staff member described the experience of a participant who had previously shown little interest in socializing:

For the first time in his life, he asked his Mum if he could have his friends over for his birthday, you know... Was just magic, because he’s never been interested in having friends over. He’s never wanted to have a party. He’s never wanted to have anything like that. But being in the program and developing those really close friendships [...] (S1).

Another staff member reflected on how social engagement had become a key driver for continued participation, “and just the fact that they’re actually happy to come in and they really want to see their friends, that’s probably the biggest difference that we see in the first year” (S3). For some participants, the enjoyment of Campus Life was as much about social connection as it was about activities or learning opportunities. A parent observed, “I think he [...] enjoys the company as much as anything [...] these are my bros” (P1). Similarly, another parent noted how their child found fulfillment in simply being with others and forming relationships, “I think he just enjoys going, making friends and all that sort of stuff” (P6).

Theme 4: Uncertain future access to a valued opportunity

Parents expressed concerns about the long-term sustainability of their child’s participation in Campus Life, fearing that financial constraints could limit access to what they perceived to be one of the few meaningful opportunities available. For one family, Campus Life was the only structured activity their child participated in for a few months as it was the only component of their individualized funding package (NDIS) where they had not, as yet, exhausted their funds:

The funding (for Campus Life) is no problem. So, he (will) keep going for Campus Life, but other parts of NDIS, we run out, so his only things that make him really, really happy to participate, is only the Campus Life (program) for past couple of months. (P5)

Some parents were worried about their ability to maintain access and the possibility of their child losing access to the program. One parent stated, “(Campus Life) used up quite a fair bit of his NDIS (plan), so I’m not sure that we’re going to be able to have funding to cover it for next year” (P2). Another parent described their financial concerns, explaining, “we were going to completely run out of money” (P3), while another noted that “some of their (Campus Life funding) lines aren’t actually going to be covered by (his NDIS) plan” (P6).

One parent described their child’s reaction when they had exhausted their funding and were unable to attend, “he didn’t like (not going), he said, ‘I want to go back to Campus Life, I want to go back.’ Like, he really wanted to go back because it felt like it was just stopped all of a sudden” (P4). Losing access was particularly concerning as parents felt that Campus Life was more beneficial than other more traditional options such as a supported employment setting or community participation program. One parent explained, “I’d rather him go to Campus Life rather than (other service), because it’s all beneficial for him to go to Campus Life than to go to (other service), and do supported employment” (P4).

Discussion

This study explored the experiences and perceived impacts of Campus Life, a post-school transition program for autistic youth with ID, using input from participants, parents, and staff. Although survey data were collected from a small group of participants, their responses suggested a desire for greater engagement in social, recreational, and leisure activities, areas often underemphasized in traditional transition pathways. These early insights helped inform and contextualize the more detailed perspectives shared by parents and staff, who described how Campus Life supported participants’ social connection, growing autonomy and overall development during the program.

Existing research on autism and transition services has primarily focused on education and employment outcomes, often to the exclusion of people with ID ([White, Adams et al., 2024](#)). Our findings underscore the progress made by young people with ID through participation in a holistic, person-centered approach to transitions. Through qualitative data, this study highlights how structured yet flexible environments, opportunities for meaningful social engagement, and individualized support can shape more positive transition experiences. These findings can help to expand conventional definitions of transition success that narrowly emphasize workforce participation, underscoring the need for programs that prioritize autonomy, wellbeing, and social connection.

A central theme created from stakeholder accounts was the role of Campus Life in fostering a sense of psychological and physical safety, an essential foundation for engagement. Many participants had prior experiences of school refusal, often linked to distressing or exclusionary educational environments. School refusal is well documented in autism research, with factors such as anxiety and negative school experiences (e.g. bullying) contributing to disengagement ([Nordin et al., 2024](#)). The absence of school refusal within Campus Life suggests that the program successfully created conditions conducive to participation, emphasizing predictability, emotional security and acceptance. This aligns with emerging research emphasizing the importance of safe environments in supporting the autonomy and self-determination of autistic people with ID ([Ryan et al., 2024](#)). In our study, stakeholders described Campus Life as a space where participants could engage at their own pace, gradually build confidence, and navigate social interactions without fear of failure or pressure to conform to neurotypical expectations. Alongside increased autonomy, stakeholders described improvements in participants’ emotional regulation, highlighting shifts such as reduced anxiety, greater self-awareness, and the ability to express distress

before it escalated. These findings reinforce the argument that transition programs must not only equip autistic youth with practical skills but also cultivate environments that foster a sense of belonging and psychological safety.

Findings from this study further highlight the limitations of existing transition models that disproportionately prioritize employment outcomes. Descriptive data from participants indicated an interest in greater involvement across multiple domains, including social, recreational, and daily activities. While these responses do not provide detailed insights into their experiences within Campus Life, they suggest that autistic youth with ID may have broader transition priorities beyond employment. Historically, transition research and services have framed success primarily in terms of workforce integration, with little attention given to social and emotional development (White, Adams *et al.*, 2024). Programs available to autistic youth with ID remain particularly scarce, often centering on employment-related goals (e.g. Romualdez *et al.*, 2020; Sung *et al.*, 2023; Wehman *et al.*, 2020; Whittenburg *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, stakeholder perspectives in this study suggest that Campus Life provided participants with opportunities to build friendships, develop social confidence, and engage in personal growth, alongside learning independent living and work-related skills. The emphasis on social connection reported by parents and staff underscores the importance of expanding transition success metrics beyond employment to better align with the needs and priorities of autistic youth with ID.

The holistic approach of Campus Life appears to play a crucial role in equipping autistic youth with ID with the practical skills needed for a more independent adulthood. Previous research on the post-school transition experience of autistic youth has shown that they often report feeling unprepared for the responsibilities of adulthood, particularly in areas such as decision-making, financial management, and independent living (White, Simpson *et al.*, 2024). More broadly, autistic youth face systemic barriers due to fragmented service systems and a decline in structured support post-school (Chun *et al.*, 2023; Ishler *et al.*, 2022; Wolpe *et al.*, 2023) which may significantly impact their ability to develop the skills necessary for autonomy. For autistic youth with ID, these barriers may be even more pronounced, parents often struggle with navigating fragmented services, uncertainty about available supports, and a lack of clear transition pathways, contributing to stress and difficulty securing post-school opportunities for their children (Codd and Hewitt, 2021). In contrast, stakeholders reported that Campus Life participants were gaining many of these “skills of adulthood” (White, Simpson *et al.*, 2024), such as being given opportunities to make independent decisions and being able to purchase items on their own.

This growing confidence extended to social interactions, with participants receiving support to develop meaningful relationships in ways that felt natural and affirming to them. Many autistic people express a strong desire for social connection, though the ways in which they seek and engage in relationships may differ from neurotypical expectations (Black *et al.*, 2022). Autistic youth with ID are no different in their need for belonging and connection, yet they may face additional barriers that limit access to affirming social opportunities. Autistic adults themselves have highlighted the importance of strengths-based, affirming support in navigating adult social landscapes (White, Simpson *et al.*, 2024), and findings from this study suggest that Campus Life offers a promising model for fostering both the practical and social foundations necessary for a fulfilling and autonomous adulthood.

Limitations

A key limitation of this study is the dominance of staff and parent voices within the qualitative data set, which, while offering valuable insights into the program’s structure and implementation, may not fully capture the experiences of Campus Life participants. Despite efforts to include the perspectives of autistic youth with ID through accessible, visually supported surveys, participant data remained limited, constraining the depth and diversity of experiences represented in the analysis. The small number of participants in each

stakeholder group also narrowed the range of perspectives available for interpretation, and although parent and staff data were combined to explore shared themes relevant to the research question, this approach may have masked differences between groups. There is also a possibility of positive bias in parent and staff accounts, as parents who valued the program and staff involved in its delivery may have been more inclined to emphasize favorable outcomes. While participants were encouraged to reflect honestly, this potential for social desirability bias should be considered. Additionally, our research team did not include members with lived experience of intellectual disability, which may have influenced both the study design and the interpretive lens applied during analysis. Finally, the short grant funding period constrained our ability to follow participants across the full three-year duration of the program, limiting insight into longer-term experiences and impacts.

Future research

Future research on Campus Life can build on these initial findings to better understand how the program evolves and impacts participants over time. This study provided early insights into how parents and staff perceive its role in fostering social connection, autonomy and skill development, but further research is needed to measure outcomes and explore them longitudinally. Furthermore, future research should move beyond narrow, employment-centered transition models to explore more holistic, person-centered approaches that genuinely reflect the diverse priorities of autistic youth with ID. Critically, research must also seek to better understand what those priorities are by incorporating lived experiences, rather than assuming predefined transition goals. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term impacts of holistic transition programs on their wellbeing, autonomy and social inclusion, alongside postschool education and employment programs or opportunities. Greater attention should also be given to identifying and addressing the specific barriers faced by autistic youth with ID in post-school transitions, particularly in navigating fragmented support systems and securing meaningful opportunities for connection, self-determination, and personal growth. Importantly, future studies must prioritize accessible, participatory methodologies that center the voices of autistic people with ID to address their continued exclusion from research that directly affects their lives (Gibbs *et al.*, 2024). This includes developing and validating alternative communication strategies, utilizing multi-informant approaches, and engaging autistic people with ID as co-researchers to ensure findings are both meaningful and actionable. By embracing more inclusive participatory research approaches, the field can move toward developing transition supports that are not only evidence-based but also truly aligned with the needs, strengths and aspirations of autistic youth with ID.

Conclusion

This study adds to the growing recognition that transition support for autistic youth with ID must move beyond employment-focused models to include wellbeing, autonomy and social connection. Drawing on the perspectives of participants, parents, and staff, our findings highlight the value of structured, inclusive environments that promote psychological safety and meaningful participation. While Campus Life supported personal growth and social engagement, further research is needed to understand its long-term impact and how outcomes vary across individuals. Transition programs should reflect the diverse aspirations of autistic youth with ID, whether focused on friendships, life skills or work, rather than a singular model of success. Inclusive, participatory approaches are essential to ensuring these programs align with what matters most to the young people they serve.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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