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## **\$45 million donation to La Trobe's autism research**

La Trobe University is the beneficiary of one of Australia's largest single donations to a tertiary education provider, receiving \$45 million for its life-changing research into autism.

The significant gift was made by the late Olga Tennison – a compassionate Brisbane-born philanthropist with a life-long interest in autism, sparked by a family connection.

Mrs Tennison's connection with La Trobe spans more than a decade; she was responsible for the establishment in 2008 of Australia's first research centre dedicated to autism – the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC).

Mrs Tennison died in January 2021, at the age of 92, leaving the \$45 million gift to La Trobe in her Will.

La Trobe University Vice Chancellor Professor John Dewar AO said the extraordinary donation was testament to Mrs Tennison's passion for building a better world.

"Olga was an inspirational and compassionate person who directed so much of what she had – both socially and financially – to ensuring every child on the autism spectrum could thrive," Professor Dewar said.

"It was through her vision, many years ago, that we were able to establish this world-class research centre which has already had an enormous impact in the community – not just in Australia, but globally."

Professor Dewar said the gift demonstrates the potential for any university to attract a significant donation.

"If a university's research is impactful enough, and aligns with the passions of a donor – as it did in this case – it can lead to quite extraordinary outcomes," Professor Dewar said.

Founding Director and Chair of OTARC Professor Cheryl Dissanayake said, unlike many major Australian donors and philanthropists, Olga was not from intergenerational family wealth with a long history of philanthropic giving.

"Olga lived a life without extravagance so the money she and her husband accrued over a lifetime could be put to use in a significant, lasting and meaningful way," Professor Dissanayake said.

"We are so proud that Olga had such a strong belief in OTARC's work, and look forward to honouring her legacy by producing more impactful research in this area for many years to come."

Researchers at La Trobe University's OTARC conduct internationally recognised autism research across the lifespan, including early detection and diagnosis, intervention and supports, and employment and wellbeing.

[A ground-breaking study](#) recently published in JAMA Open showed a screening tool developed as part of her PhD study 15 years ago by Associate Professor Josephine Barbaro is the world's most effective at identifying autism early in life.

Professor Dissanayake and a group of international autism experts recently published [The Lancet Commission on the future of care and clinical research in autism](#) which will help pave the way for OTARC's 'reimagining' in the future.

The gift is endowed and will be held in perpetuity to support the work of OTARC.

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