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# Strategic Plan 2023–28

creating **knowledge**  
creating **impact**



# Mrs Olga Tennison AO 1928–2021

The establishment of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre in 2008 was made possible by a generous donation from Mrs Olga Tennison, AO. Her subsequent contributions have enabled the advancement of autism research in Australia and beyond, with the Centre named in acknowledgment of her extraordinary support.

Olga was an intelligent, impressive and inspirational woman. She was also a woman of unwavering faith and unmediated graciousness with a focus on the good she could do in the world. Her voice, as someone with a close personal experience of autism, gave her determination and an authenticity to speak on behalf of the Centre and promote its work, of which she remained very proud.

Olga lived a life without extravagance so that the money she and her husband accrued over a lifetime could be put to use in a significant, lasting and meaningful way. She leaves a legacy of giving and service, and long commitment to autism research.

Mrs Tennison passed away in January 2021, at the age of 92, leaving a generous bequest to La Trobe University in her Will. The gift is endowed and will be held in perpetuity to support the work of OTARC.





## **Commitment to Inclusion**

**At OTARC,  
and in this Strategic Plan,  
we use identity-first language  
(Autistic person).**

We acknowledge, however, the variety of language preferences in the Autistic and autism communities. We also acknowledge that autism is one aspect of neurodiversity. Our research and practice will be inclusive of other forms of neurodiversity and considerate of the intersection of neurominority status with other minority experience.

# Introduction

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University was established in 2008 and is the first centre dedicated to autism research in Australia.

Through her personal philanthropy, the late Olga Tennison AO has ensured our Centre will continue and expand upon its work in perpetuity, for the benefit of the Autistic and autism communities. Olga was committed to improving the lives of Autistic people as well as their families and carers. We will progress her legacy by *creating knowledge* through research and *creating impact* through evidence-informed practice.

Autistic people, their families and carers will be at the centre of all we do. Our focus is on generating knowledge and implementing practices that enhance the lives of Autistic people, their families, and carers across their lifespan. Autistic voices will be central in co-creating our research and informing our practice.

We will develop capacity in Autistic and non-Autistic autism researchers and practitioners. Together with the Autistic and autism communities, these professionals will be central in conceptualising and undertaking our research and practice, and in communication of our findings locally, nationally and internationally. We will measure our success through evaluation and meeting our ambitious Key Performance Indicators.

The scope of our work aligns with two of La Trobe University's research themes: 'Healthy People, Families and Communities' and 'Social Change and Equity'. Our research and practice will be inclusive, collaborative, bold and transformative. We will create new practice partnerships and in so doing, broaden the scope of our research and accelerate its translation into practice, empowering and improving Autistic lives.

We aspire to an organisational culture that is ambitious, creative, collaborative, and respectful, and one that strives for excellence. We encourage lively discussion and critical debate and remain open to challenges, new ideas and change.



# Our Cultural Qualities

Equity and inclusion in societies is realised through the participation of diverse individuals and communities. **We seek to ensure a culture where access, diversity and inclusivity are recognised, valued and celebrated.** The creation of an inclusive and supporting workplace is our collective responsibility.

## Connected

We involve the Autistic community and connect our research with the communities we serve

## Innovative

We create a path for research to positively enhance the lives of Autistic people, their families and carers

## Accountable

We are honest, ethical and considered in all our activities and in honouring Olga Tennison's legacy

## Care

Generosity of spirit and respect drives our actions and interactions

# Chair's Statement

A true measure of our research and its translation is the positive influence it brings to Autistic lives. It is this brief that we are charged with at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC), and that has informed our strategic planning.

The current context in which we have developed our Strategic Plan is much changed since the development of our previous plan, thanks to the neurodiversity movement, Covid-19 pandemic, and the Australia wide roll-out of the NDIS in which over a third of participants are Autistic. More locally, the launch of the State Autism Plan in Victoria, and the report released by the Standing Senate Select Committee earlier in 2022 have all played a role in autism in Australia and highlighting, more than ever before, the needs within the Autistic community.

This Strategic Plan was developed based on interviews with internal and external individuals and groups including people with lived experience, La Trobe University internal stakeholders and La Trobe's own strategic plan, as well as key national and international autism researchers. This includes Autistic people, their families and/or carers, and Autistic-led and autism

community organisations. The consultation provided feedback on the Centre's work to-date, and consideration of the likely opportunities and challenges over the next five years. We have been both bold and responsive in developing a suite of goals to drive our work.

It is important that we work across disciplinary boundaries and that we align our research with the standards expected within our own university and via national and international benchmarks for research excellence, translation, and impact.

Our goals are to *create knowledge* and *create impact*. A re-imagined OTARC will translate the highest-quality research evidence by teaching, training and delivering supports and practices suitable for Autistic people from infancy and through their lifespan.

In delivering this Strategic Plan, our collective aim is to foster an aspirational and ambitious culture. We will work to continue Olga's legacy through our research programs and the translation of our research to improve health and wellbeing in the communities that we serve.

**Professor Cheryl Dissanayake, AM, FASSA**  
**Olga Tennison Endowed Chair in Autism Research**



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# Director's Statement

In 2008, OTARC comprised a sole academic researcher and her students, researching autism in the early years of life including charting the early autism phenotype to drive down the age of diagnosis. Supported by Olga's initial donation this work has been groundbreaking, resulting in the development and translation of the world's most sensitive autism identification tools for children.

The OTARC team grew and expanded in focus, partnering with the La Trobe Community Children's Centre to embed research in practice, and offer Victorian families access to evidence-informed early therapy in an innovative early learning context. Research in adolescence and adulthood quickly followed, including examining the best ways to support Autistic people in the workplace, understanding health impacts such as sleep difficulties and determining how best to prevent mental ill-health and suicide.

The generous bequest from Olga Tennison AO, in addition to securing the continuation of this important work, allows the Centre to expand to deliver more world-best programs of research. We commit to researching topics of the greatest relevance to the Autistic and autism communities, across the lifespan of Autistic people and across the full spectrum of

abilities. The Strategic Plan will ensure that within five years OTARC will be leading additional programs of research including identification and diagnosis throughout the lifespan, evidence-informed schooling practices, and ageing, to name a few. Our research programs are consistent with those prioritised by the Australian and international Autistic community.

OTARC will also embark on an ambitious, world-leading plan to translate research to practices across the lifespan:

- » offering exemplar service programs with reach across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria and beyond;
- » with industry, disseminating proven services and products from our research to the Australian and international professionals and the families they serve within a not-for-profit model;
- » developing the capacity of the next generation of autism practitioners in neuro-affirming practices; and
- » working with Commonwealth and State governments and policy-makers to ensure decisions are made that best serve the needs of the Autistic community.

It is our aspiration to deliver knowledge and supports that promote the best outcomes for Autistic people, their families and carers. Our success will be measured by the success of Autistic people in actively and meaningfully engaging in daily life, throughout their life course.

**Professor Alison Lane**  
**Director, OTARC**

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# Our Vision

A world where Autistic people, their families and their carers thrive

# Our Mission

To enrich the lives of Autistic people, their families and their carers through high-quality scientific research, innovation and translation

# Our Goals

**At OTARC we promote positive change in the lives of Autistic people, their families and their carers. We will:**

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## **Conduct and lead the highest quality multidisciplinary research where we:**

1

- » Engage Autistic people at every stage of our research
- » Are a partner of choice with community, government and industry

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## **Translate research into practice by:**

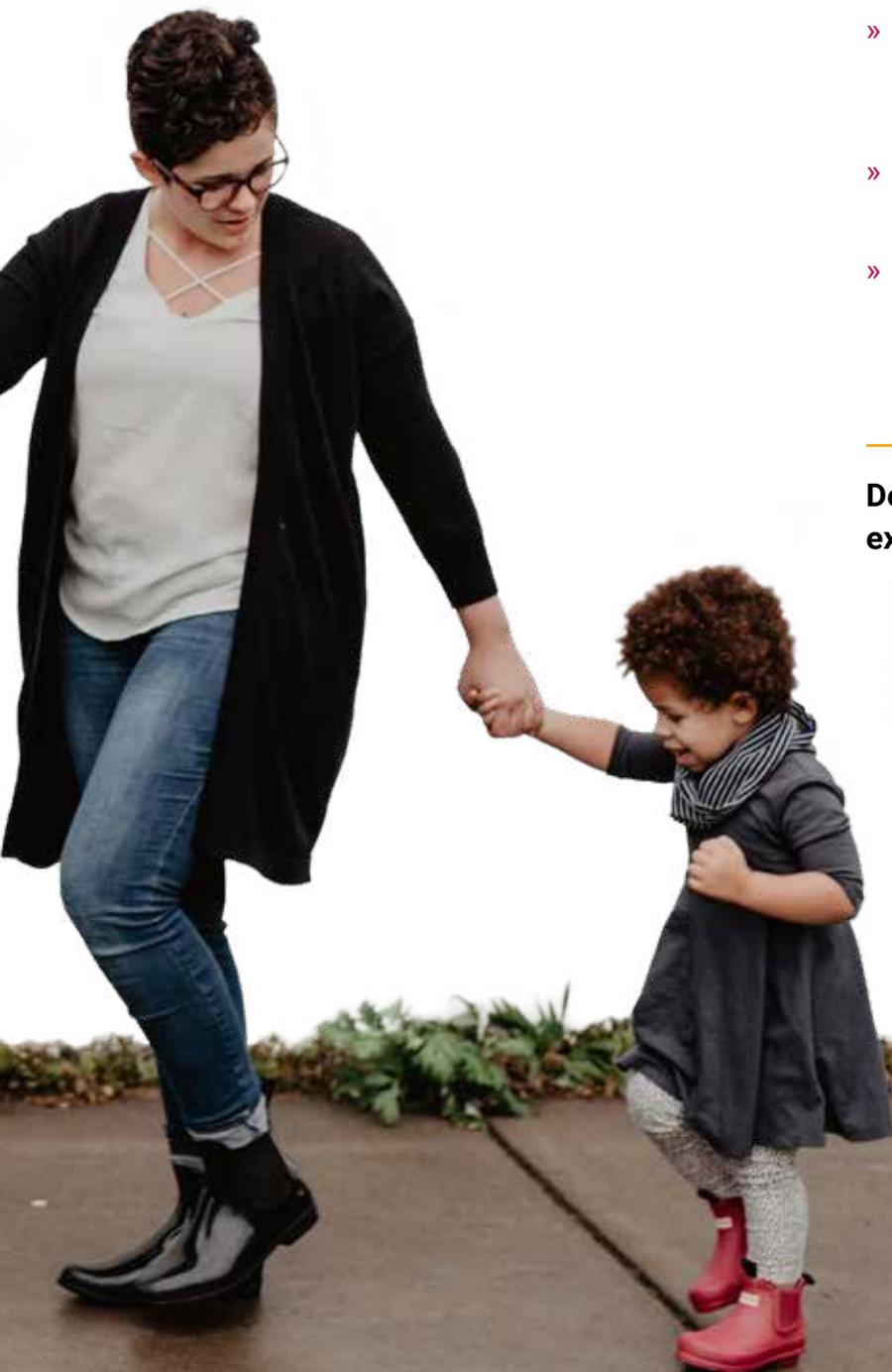
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- » Developing, delivering and evaluating evidence-informed practices and supports
- » Embedding research in services and the community
- » Training outstanding autism scholars and practitioners

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## **Deliver research and operational excellence**

3



# Our Goals and Strategies

**At OTARC we promote positive change in the lives of Autistic people, their families, and their carers. We will:**

1

**Conduct and lead the highest-quality multi-disciplinary research where we:**

**Engage Autistic people at every stage of our research**

- » Develop an OTARC-specific participatory research framework that guides Autistic engagement in research design, production and evaluation
- » Instigate regular cycles of planning with the Autistic and autism communities to refresh our understanding of their needs and to maintain research relevance and currency

**Are a partner of choice with community, government and industry**

- » Facilitate a research culture that values integrity, rigour and discussion
- » Establish a baseline, measure, and report the social and economic impact of autism research and practice
- » Instigate participation and provide leadership to strategically-important national initiatives
- » Develop and maintain Australian and international partnerships
- » Be a trusted source of evidence-based knowledge and practice
- » Develop strong relationships with the rural and regional communities where La Trobe University campuses are located
- » Engage with other disciplines, research centres and institutes within and outside La Trobe University to broaden our scientific capacity and enhance our impact.



## 2

### Translate research to practice by:

#### Developing, delivering and evaluating evidence-informed practices and supports

- » Establish assessment services and work to improve diagnosis across the lifespan
- » Identify and research the service needs and access barriers for Autistic people throughout the lifespan to develop accessible pathways to support.
- » Evaluate service delivery and accessibility to test impact and efficacy

#### Embedding research in services and the community

- » Engage with communities and key service delivery partners to facilitate research translation and implementation of evidence-informed practices
- » Develop and promote service policies that improve the lives of Autistic people
- » Use all relevant forms of media to disseminate and increase the impact of our work in the community
- » Work within La Trobe University, including with its neurodiversity initiative, to embed neurominority best-practice and service within the City of the Future initiative

#### Training outstanding autism scholars and practitioners

- » Work with Autistic co-designers to develop autism-specific course materials for relevant degrees across La Trobe University
- » Attract, support and retain high-quality early-career scholars and staff
- » Train healthcare, education, and vocational practitioners on the abilities and needs of Autistic people
- » Develop undergraduate and honours pathways for Autistic people through scholarships at La Trobe University
- » Establish grants and scholarships programs for early career and Autistic scholars that focus on bold and transformative autism research
- » Engage with other disciplines via seminars, conferences, and hosting research scholars to further enrich our research and practice.

## 3

### Deliver research and operational excellence:

- » Develop mechanisms and a culture that enables the Centre to attract and retain Autistic staff and students
- » Work with La Trobe University and its neurodiversity initiative to be a neurodiversity employer of choice and to ensure academic success amongst its neurominority students
- » Maintain a culture that values governance and facilitates accountability, including to our benefactors and research participants
- » Disseminate research findings in high-impact journals and books, at Australian and international conferences, and community events
- » Review grant processes and diversify funding opportunities available through competitive grants, industry and government agencies, donations and bequests
- » Capture, grow and strengthen data assets, including historical data, with particular attention to longitudinal databases
- » Ensure the research, operational and service-facility needs of OTARC are met
- » Commercialise research using a not-for-profit model and train staff to work with relevant university partners in commercialisation and intellectual property management
- » Exceed La Trobe University benchmarks for research outputs and income
- » Work with La Trobe University to maximise Olga Tennison's gift to fund autism research in perpetuity.



# Creating Knowledge: Our Research Program Areas

Our Research Programs are aligned with research priorities identified by the Australian and international Autistic community and will be focussed on promoting meaningful outcomes across the lifespan and the full range of abilities:

## Identification and Diagnosis

Developing and evaluating evidence-based approaches to identify and diagnose autism at all ages to activate timely and personalised supports

## Supports and Practices for Daily Living

Developing and evaluating evidence-based practices and supports that enable Autistic people to live a life that is meaningful to them across the lifespan

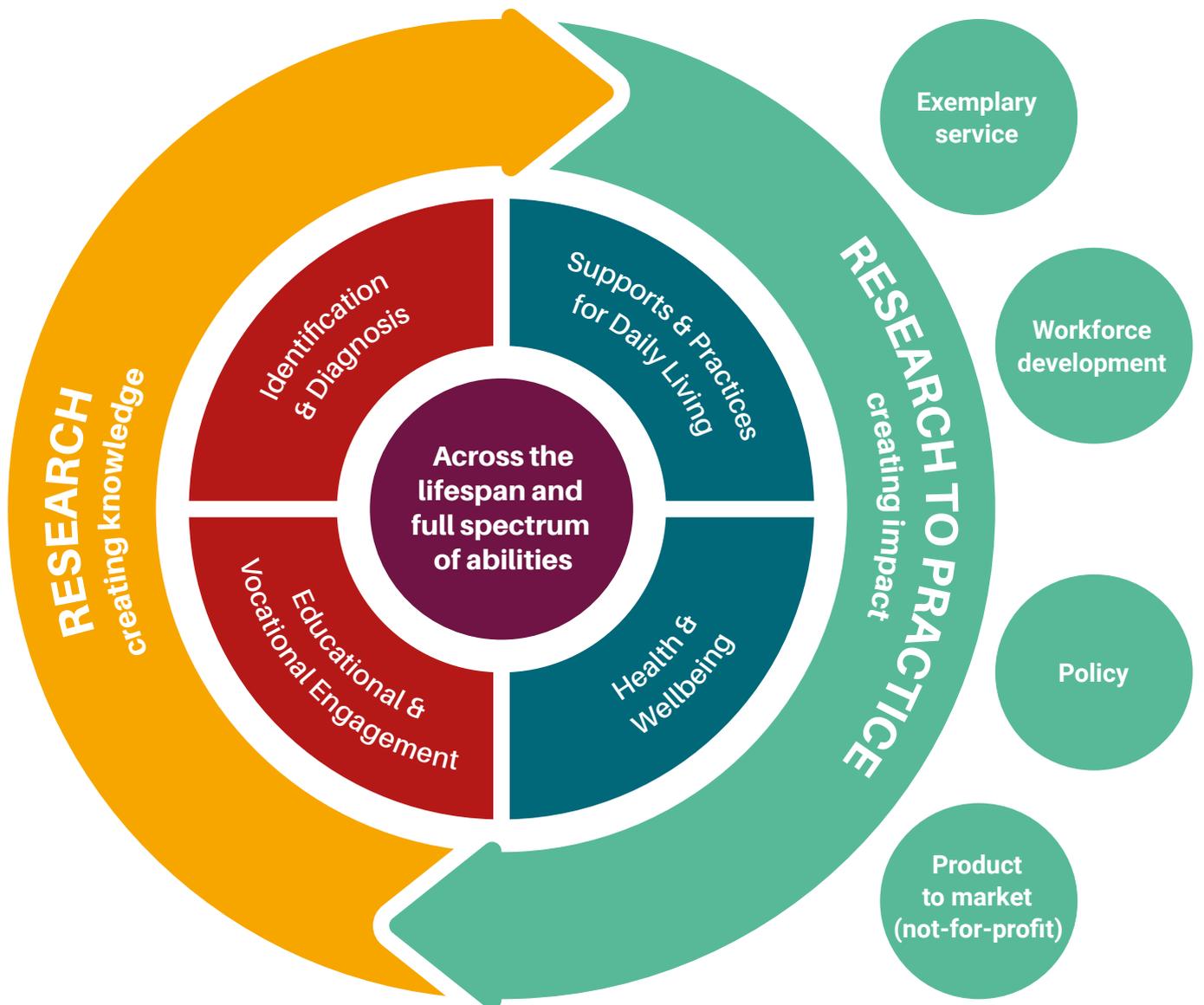
## Educational and Vocational Engagement

Determining and promoting the best learning and vocational pathways for Autistic people at all levels of education and in volunteer and paid employment

## Health and Wellbeing

Understanding factors that influence the health and wellbeing of Autistic people to inform and enhance supports and practices across the lifespan

# Creating Knowledge, Creating Impact



# Creating Impact: Research to Practice

Our research to practice work will explore innovation through:

- » Mechanisms to explore evidence-informed, exemplary supports and services;
- » The possible expansion of workforce development in neuro-affirming practice;
- » The benefits of evidence-based policy; and
- » Developing, with industry, the dissemination of research products to the community.

The insights generated through our Research to Practice activities will, in turn, inform our Research, strengthening, streamlining, and expediting the research to impact pathway.



## Highlights of OTARC'S strategic initiatives

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Creating and delivering neurodiversity-affirming teaching and training programs and courses

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Planned expansion of the Margot Prior Early Autism Centre to cater for growing demand in metro as well as rural and regional preschool-aged autistic children and their families

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Re-establishing the Early Assessment and Diagnostic Clinic for under 3-year-olds

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First comprehensive epidemiological study on prevalence of autism in Australia and New Zealand

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Aut-visory Group: OTARC's stakeholder initiative to meaningfully include Autistic people and their families in all stages of the research and research to practice lifecycle

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