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Supporting Transition to the Workforce for Neurodivergent Learners: Insights from a Canadian Study on the Neuroinclusivity of Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

This article offers evidence-based recommendations to enhance the neuroinclusivity of post-secondary career education and practices for career educators and student support professionals. The authors share insights from an applied research study that employed a mixed method design that included a national survey of neurodivergent post-secondary students and recent graduates (n=400) and 78 in-depth interviews with neurodivergent students and recent graduates (n=45) and staff and leaders working in accessibility services (n=33). Findings revealed that neurodivergent post-secondary students encountered significant barriers to post-secondary education, which impact graduation rates and successful workforce transitions. Reduction of stigma, improved access to tailored supports, and neuroaffirming approaches to supporting students with potential transition challenges such as employment searching, disclosure, and accommodations were identified as enablers for success. This article presents recommendations from the most comprehensive national data set on neuroinclusivity in Canadian post-secondary education. This article offers actionable recommendations for career educators to use strength-based approaches and reduce employment barriers for neurodivergent individuals.

Keywords: neurodiversity, higher education, career development, career transition, transition to workforce

1. Setting the Scene

Post-secondary education has long been associated with increased employability, yet many graduates experience both real and perceived barriers to their transition to the labour force (Donald et al, 2018). For equity seeking students, such as those who are neurodivergent and/or

have disabilities, additional obstacles to employment, such as stigma and a lack of accessible and inclusive supports and pathways, increase barriers (Noel et al., 2017). Neurodivergent individuals face additional challenges to employment and workforce entry in comparison to their neurotypical and non-disabled peers, yet employment outcomes still differ by neurodivergent identity/diagnosis (Chen et al., 2015). National data sets across multiple OECD countries demonstrate that autistic individuals experienced of the lowest rates of any employment group of people with disabilities (Web et al., 2024).

Globally, we have seen post-secondary institutions recognizing the need to make higher education more inclusive for neurodivergent individuals (Winberg et al., 2019). However, as neurodiversity has been largely ignored within diversity, equity, and inclusion movements, this work has been impeded by a lack of comprehensive data on the ‘how to’ of enhancing accessibility and inclusion (Dwyer et al., 2023). Better understanding of the experiences of equity seeking student groups supports institutions in addressing obstacles to inclusion and access. Additionally, professionals who work within and adjacent to the post-secondary education, such as career educators, also benefit from increased understandings of the barriers and enablers to success experienced by neurodivergent students in their educational and career transitions to inform their work.

To address this gap, the authors present findings from the most comprehensive national data set on neuroinclusivity in Canadian post-secondary education. Data includes the first national survey of neurodivergent post-secondary students and recent graduates (n=400) and 78 in-depth interviews with neurodivergent students and recent graduates (n=45) and staff and leaders working in accessibility services (n=33) (Fane, 2024, 2025).

This article synthesizes key insights from the national data set to provide actionable recommendations to career educators. Supporting them to leverage strength-based approaches and reduce barriers to employment and career sustainability for neurodivergent individuals.

2. Profiles of Neurodivergent Learners

Understanding the learner profile of neurodivergent students within post-secondary education is crucial for creating inclusive environments that support learning and transition to the workforce. By recognizing the characteristics and challenges of this population, institutions can better tailor their supports and services, ensuring that neurodivergent students can thrive academically and better leverage their education and skill development into the workforce.

Demographic information from survey respondents provides a snapshot into the experiences of post-secondary students and their neurodivergent identities or diagnoses. The most reported neurodivergent identity/diagnoses were ADHD (59 %), mental health disorders (46 %), autism (24 %) and learning disabilities (15 %). While these identities/diagnoses may have implications for students’ academic and support needs, these students are largely invisible to their post-secondary institutions, with less than half (43 %) choosing to disclose their diagnosis. A barrier to disclosure and registration with accessibility services is the requirement for students to have a formal diagnosis and documentation. Only a third (33 %) of students surveyed reported having a formal diagnosis, and 73 % of students who did not disclose reported at least one barrier to disclosure, highlighting the interconnected challenges between diagnosis, disclosure, and receiving support and accommodations.

Additionally, many neurodivergent students are managing complex learning profiles including 38 % of students who reported multiple neurodivergent identities/diagnoses and 62 % who reported intersectional identities such as being disabled/having a disability or being a member of another equity seeking group.

The learning and professional development needs of neurodivergent learners are different than those of neurotypical students, and with some neurodivergent students having more complex and distinct academic and learning needs to other diverse student groups. Yet, due to the relative invisibility of the population in post-secondary education, little has been known about neurodivergent student experiences.

The following section provides a rationale and evidenced-based recommendations for career educators in higher education and workforce transition programs from analysis of both quantitative and qualitative study data.

3. Strength-Based Approaches to Understanding Employability for Neurodivergent Individuals

Neurodivergent individuals are frequently viewed as less employable than their neurotypical peers due to stigma about the ways in which neurodivergent individuals learn and prefer to communicate and socialize (Davies et al., 2023). All individuals bring various forms of capital (skills, competencies, and lived experiences) to their employability and career sustainability (Donald et al., 2018). For neurodivergent individuals, however, their capital is often overlooked, or overshadowed by their learning, social, or communication preferences that can be negatively perceived.

Increasingly, there is a body of research that shows that neurodiverse teams benefit businesses and organizations, both in terms of skills and competencies, but also in improved company culture, increased retention, and more diverse talent (Hutchison, 2023). Yet, there remains a disconnect between the real value neurodivergent individuals' skills and talents can bring to their work, and neurodivergent individual's experiences in transitioning to and within the workforce (Fellows, 2025). For career educators, this results in both an opportunity and a challenge.

Neurodivergent individuals benefit from working with career educators to identify their skills, talents, and areas where supports or accommodations can address functional challenges impacting workplace success (Coffey & Lovegrove, 2023). Supporting a neurodivergent learner to better understand their employability profile is a strength-based approach that is both neuroaffirming and works to dismantle internalized stigma and real barriers to workplace success.

Recommendation 1: Identifying Strengths and Support Needs

Stigma around learning, social, and communication differences results in neurodivergent individuals experiencing negative educational and social situations, with heightened awareness of their deficits compared to their neurotypical peers (Chapman & Botha, 2023). An increased awareness of deficits impacts neurodivergent individual's self-esteem, which can hinder both the student's ability to accurately identify strengths, and to separate a real or perceived deficit from a support need.

When working with a student or client, they may need repeated or individualized support to identify their support needs in relation to deficits (real or perceived). For example, a student

whose reported deficit is poor working memory, may require all information (such as instructions or assignments) in writing, versus given verbally.

For many neurodivergent individuals, the increased awareness of deficits can lead to internalized shame. Having access to the lived experiences of other neurodivergent people, such as through storytelling, mentorship (both formal and informal) and support groups can be a neuroaffirming approach to exploring and identifying strengths, support needs, and tailored supports (Chapman & Botha, 2023; Zografou & McDermott, 2022). Support needs and what types of supports a neurodivergent individual may benefit from is often in relation to executive functioning.

Recommendation 2: Executive Function Supports

Executive functions are the higher order skills needed to plan, focus, remember, and self-manage. Executive function demands are a substantial barrier for neurodivergent individuals in post-secondary education, the workplace, and daily life (Dwyer et al., 2023). Neurodivergent post-secondary students and recent graduates reported barriers related to executive function (organization, planning, motivation, working memory, attention) two to three times higher than any other barrier such as financial, social/communication challenges, or discrimination.

AI and assistive technologies offer promising solutions for neurodivergent individuals, helping them overcome functional challenges and communication barriers through personalized technological support (Iannone & Giansanti, 2023). Engaging neurodivergent students in learning about and using assistive technology and AI applications to meet support needs can help overcome both real and perceived barriers to employability (Desideri et al., 2020).

As part of the semi-structured interview questions, research participants (students, graduates, staff, and leaders) were asked to give examples of supports, tools and strategies they found to be beneficial for themselves and/or the neurodivergent learners they support. Participants responses were coded thematically and arranged in broad categories around support needs that impact academic success and employability.

TABLE 1. ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE APPLICATIONS
BASED ON AREAS OF FUNCTIONAL CHALLENGE

Area of Challenge	Assistive Technology Applications	Artificial Intelligence Applications
Reading and written output challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screen readers • Text-to-speech software • Word prediction, grammar, and spelling software • Scanning pens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarizing key points from notes/course material • Using AI as a tutor to answer questions, offering explanations, check for understanding, and even generating interactive learning experiences • Identify required skills from job postings relevant to desired position/role to highlight employment suitability and develop application materials
Communication challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech-to-text software 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcription tools • Note taking apps

Organization and task management challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graphic organizers and mind mapping tools and apps • Reminder management systems and apps • Time management apps • Calendars and to-do list apps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note taking apps
Sensory and auditory processing challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noise-cancelling headphones • Fidget devices • Visual search engines • Alternate lighting sources • Self-management and self-regulation support apps 	

Source: own compilation

Neurodivergent students report positive learning experiences when using assistive technology, yet these tools were found to be under-utilized in interventions and instructional strategies in post-secondary education for this population (McDowall & Kiseleva, 2024). Assistive technologies and AI are not a one size fits all approach and requires buy in from the individual for the tools to be successful.

Recommendation 3: Approaches to Disclosure and Requesting Accommodations

Research into the neuroinclusivity of Canadian workplaces and Canadian post-secondary institutions revealed that less than half of employees and post-secondary students disclose their neurodivergent identity or diagnosis (Hutchinson, 2023; Fane, 2024, 2025). Disclosure rates are impacted by stigma, barriers to documentation/clinical diagnosis, and internalized ableism. Yet we know that executive function challenges disproportionately impact neurodivergent individuals. This results in a significant proportion of the neurodivergent population potentially benefitting from disclosure, but who may be resistant or unfamiliar with the disclosure process.

For students or clients unsure about the disclosure process and if it would benefit them, supporting the individual to create a list of advantages and potential disadvantages to disclosing, can support them to feel more confident in their decision and build self-advocacy skills. Additional key considerations to engage neurodivergent students and employment seekers include:

1. If choosing to disclose, when would be the optimal time to disclose, such as on the application, during an interview, upon offer, or once starting the position? This decision will be impacted by the level of support need for the individual, the type of work, and many other factors.
2. Does the support need require a formal disclosure and accommodation request, or can it likely be accommodated without a formal process in the workplace? For example, in some workplaces integrating or using assistive technology (such as AI tools) does not require specific permissions or a formal accommodation, where others might. This exercise may also fuel the development of some questions the candidate may want to ask a potential employer.
3. Neurodivergent individuals may be more sensitive to rejection than their neurotypical peers and are likely to experience more social and employment rejection. Helping students to understand and normalize challenging experience can be a supportive way to lessen the individual's internalizing of the rejection (Chapman & Botha, 2023). Peer mentorship or support networks where neurodivergent individuals can share their

experiences and seek guidance from others who have had similar challenges can be a powerful vehicle to navigating rejection in seeking employment (Gelbar et al., 2014).

4. Neurodivergent students, job seekers, and workers need to understand their rights to protection from discrimination and reasonable accommodation, and where to seek support if they are unsure if their rights are being upheld.

Recommendation 4: Neuroaffirming Supports and Neuroinclusive Programming

The terms neuroaffirming and neuroinclusive refer to approaches to engaging with, educating, supporting, and developing programs, supports, or resources for neurodivergent individuals that value differences and focus on strengths rather than deficits (real or perceived). While many post-secondary institutions in Canada are working towards creating more inclusive and coordinated services and supports using neuroinclusive and neuroaffirming approaches, the experiences of participants across institutions is highly disparate in terms of access and uptake.

Only 35 % of neurodivergent students and recent graduates surveyed had accessed supports or services tailored to the needs of neurodivergent students at their institution. This means that they may not have had the opportunity to work with educators, support staff, career educators, and advisors who use neuroaffirming approaches. As such, the learning and social opportunities offered to students, may not have been inclusive or accessible for them.

In the study, the desired supports and programs differed based on individual’s reported diagnosis or neurodivergent identity. Survey respondents were asked to indicate ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘unsure’ to nine different types of programs or supports including: 1) transition to the workforce program; 2) experiential learning preparation; 3) peer mentorship; 4) sensory refuge areas; 5) social clubs or activities; 6) academic drop-in; 7) counselling services; 8) specialized tutoring; 9) transition to post-secondary program. The highest rated desired supports based on reported neurodivergent diagnosis/identity included:

TABLE 2. HIGHEST RATED DESIRED SUPPORTS BASED ON REPORTED NEURODIVERGENT DIAGNOSIS/IDENTITY

Diagnosis/Identity	Top 3 Desired Supports
Autism	1. Transition to the workforce supports (50 %) 2. Counselling services (50 %) 3. Social clubs or activities (45 %)
ADHD	1. Academic drop-in services (46 %) 2. Transition to workforce program (41 %) 3. Counselling services (43 %)
Mental health disorder	1. Counselling services (70 %) 2. Transition to workforce program (55 %) 3. Social clubs or activities (54 percent)
Single ‘other’ diagnosis (not including autism, ADHD, or a mental health disorder)	1. Counselling services (71 %) 2. Experiential learning preparation (50 %) 3. Transition to workforce (44 %)
Multiple diagnoses	1. Counselling services (68 %) 2. Sensory refuge areas (62 %) 3. Transition to workforce (51 %)

Source: own compilation

Transition to workforce or experiential learning preparation were highly rated supports for all students, regardless of neurodivergent identity or diagnosis, indicating they are a promising avenue for exploration in the creation of neuroaffirming and neuroinclusive employment supports.

4. Ethical and Other Important Considerations

Developing neuroinclusive and neuroaffirming programming, supports, resources, and initiatives should be guided by the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals themselves (Dwyer et al., 2023). Opportunities for neurodivergent students, career educators, employees, and managers to provide input and guidance is an essential step in creating responsive and supportive programs.

5. Concluding Remarks

Findings from this study of the neuroinclusivity of Canadian post-secondary education can provide insight into the barriers and enablers to success for neurodivergent learners transitioning from post-secondary education to the workforce. This article was written for career educators, however we hope the insights from the data and recommendations will be useful to other professionals working with neurodivergent students and clients in the areas of adult education, supported employment, and counselling services.

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Declaration Statements

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability

Data supporting the conclusions of this study can be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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Supplementary Information

The Conference Board reports referenced in this study are available upon reasonable request. Interested readers may obtain access by contacting the corresponding author via email.