Creating Inclusive Campuses

Neuroinclusive Policies and Practices in Post-Secondary Education
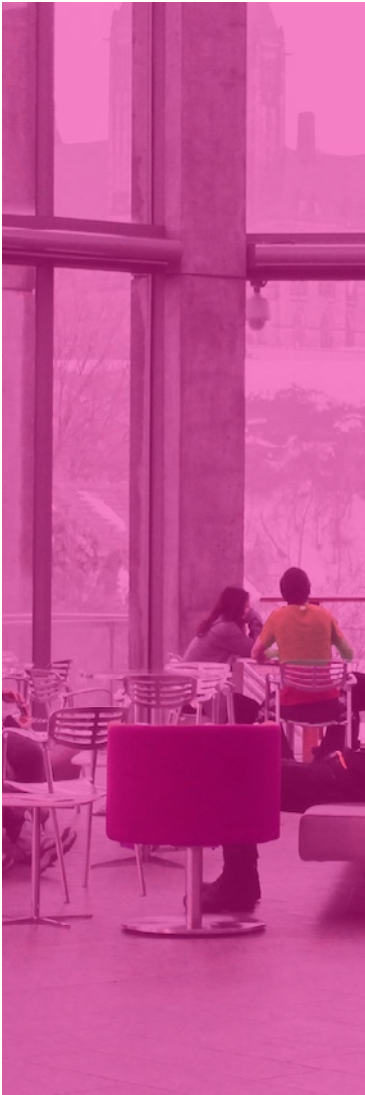
Future Skills Centre **Centre des Compétences futures**

The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada.

If you would like to learn more about this report and other skills research from FSC, visit us at fsc-ccf.ca or contact info@fsc-ccf.ca.

fsc-ccf.ca

Contents

Key findings

- Neurodivergent students are largely invisible within post-secondary education (PSE), as less than half disclose their identity or diagnosis to their institution.

- Neurodivergent students report that they face stigma and discrimination, which impacts their ability to fully participate in academic activities, complete coursework and exams, and successfully graduate.

- Neurodivergent faculty and administrative staff represent an underutilized resource for shaping neuroinclusive policies. The unique combination of their lived experience and institutional knowledge provides critical insights into the primary barriers faced by neurodivergent students.

- Integrating and centralizing student supports like accessibility, health and wellness, and student services make it easier for neurodivergent students to navigate PSE.

- Neurodivergent students benefit from receiving targeted information about their learning profiles and relevant accessibility services. This support helps them develop the self-advocacy skills required to navigate PSE effectively.

- Neurodiversity awareness training and ongoing professional development can reduce stigma and help all campus employees (e.g., teaching faculty, administrative staff, services staff) understand their role in making their post-secondary institution more inclusive.

Recommendations

Post-secondary leaders interested in enhancing the neuroinclusivity of PSE can consider the following recommendations:

• Implement mandatory neurodiversity training for all campus employees (e.g., teaching faculty, administrative staff, services staff) to address the barriers neurodivergent students face and to reduce stigma.

• Integrate accessibility into institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategic planning and policy development. Set measurable outcomes to track progress and ensure accountability.

• Create channels for neurodivergent students, staff, and faculty to contribute to EDI and accessibility policies.

• Provide neurodivergent students with information relevant to their learning and cognitive profiles and the types of supports and services that can support their functional needs and develop their self-advocacy skills.

• Adopt a neuroinclusive and neuro-affirming wraparound-service model to ensure neurodivergent students receive coordinated support across academic, accessibility, and mental health services.
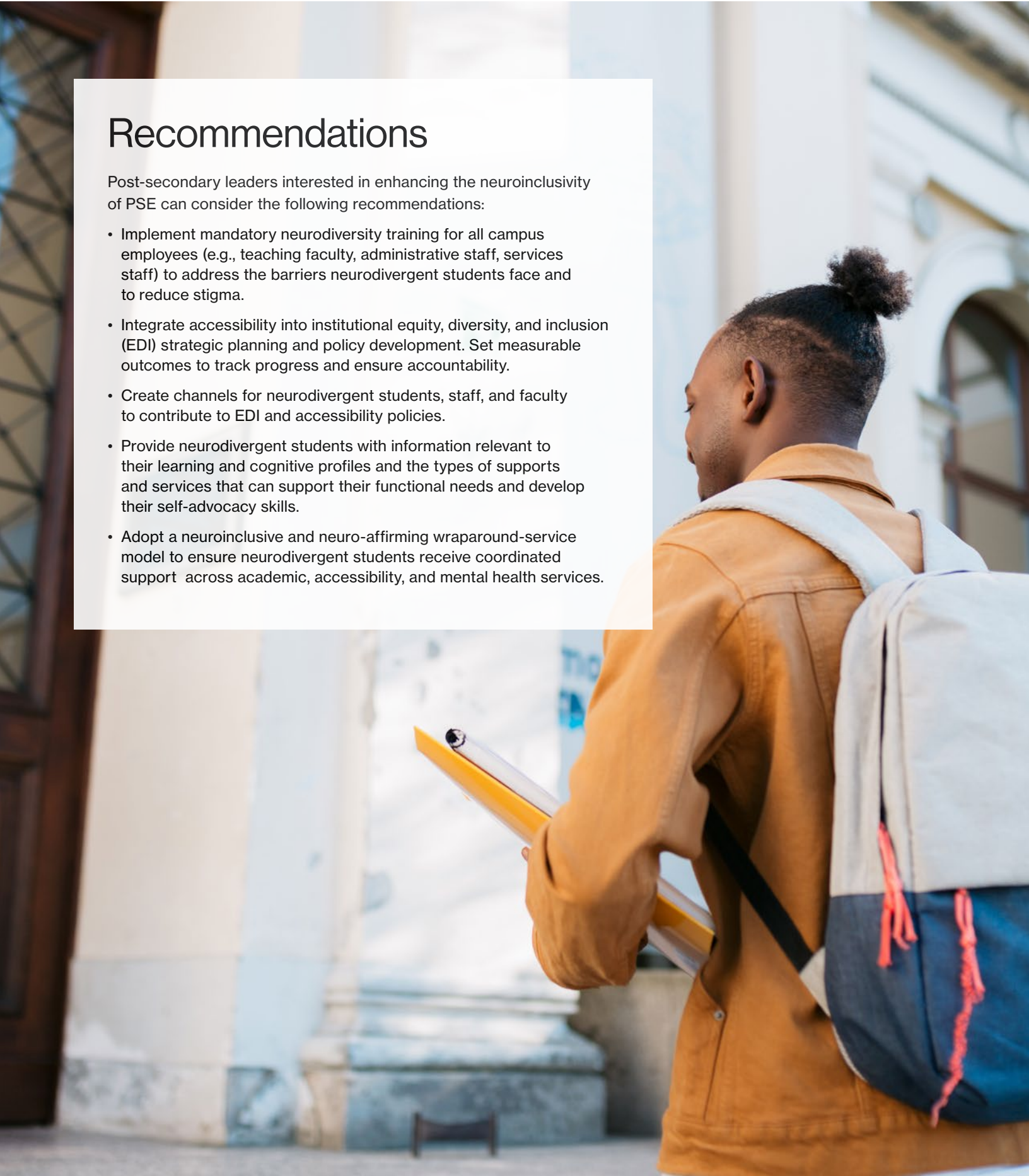
Advancing neuroinclusivity in higher education

What policies and practices are making a difference?

Despite neurodivergent students' increased access to and enrolment in post-secondary education, they remain less likely to graduate than their neurotypical peers and under-represented in Canada's labour force.[1]

This study draws on the most comprehensive national data set on neuroinclusivity in Canadian PSE. We report on the findings of the first national survey of neurodiversity in PSE, including 400 neurodivergent post-secondary students and recent graduates,[2] and 78 in-depth interviews with neurodivergent students and recent graduates (n=45) and staff and leaders working in accessibility services (n=33). See Appendix A for a detailed methodology.

In this report, we delve into the perceptions of these students, staff, and leaders to detail the policies and practices that hinder or promote neuroinclusivity in PSE. From this, we provide actionable recommendations for post-secondary institutions working to make more inclusive environments for neurodivergent students.

---

1   Newman and others, *The Post-High School Outcomes of Youth With Disabilities up to 4 Years After High School;* and Hutchison, *Breaking Down Barriers.*
2   Fane, *Making the Invisible Visible.*

Reconsidering institutional policy

"A": The missing letter in EDI policies

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is a key area for post-secondary institutions (PSIs).[3] Including accessibility as a distinct part of EDI is an important step in making policies more neuroinclusive for all students and campus members.[4] Most staff and leaders reported that their institution is starting to develop or in the process of developing EDI policies. However, neurodiversity continues to be largely overlooked in these efforts.[5]

Almost half (47 per cent) of staff and leaders we interviewed reported that their institution's EDI strategies either ignore neurodiversity or fail to address it adequately. Accessibility advisors told us they often had to advocate for a seat at the table and believed that accessibility was considered less important to senior leadership than other areas of EDI. Polytechnic staff and university leadership were most likely to say that neurodiversity is missing from their institution's EDI strategies, while college staff were the most likely to say that neurodiversity is adequately considered. (See Chart 1.)

Chart 1
Staff and leadership participants report that neurodiversity is not adequately considered in their institutional EDI policy
(number of participants, n = 32)
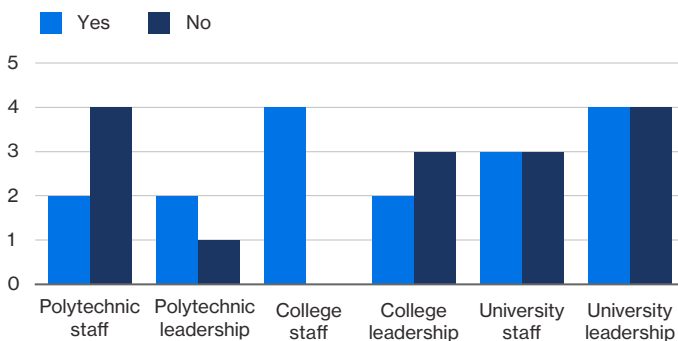
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Staff and leaders who reported that their institution was adequately addressing neurodiversity noted that this progress was driven by a focus on accessibility within policies. These interview participants stated that their institutions had expanded the traditional EDI framework to EDI-A (equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility) or IDEA (inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility). The addition of accessibility to EDI frameworks can encourage policies that increase understanding and go beyond impairment and accommodation to tackle structural and systemic barriers and stigma.[6]

"We are pushing for EDI to actually be EDI-A. When we add the A onto the EDI, neurodiversity really fits under those principles. Because [neurodiversity] is still not recognized, policy-wise, as separate from an identity practice; that's where it's missing the mark."
University Accessibility Advisor

"I feel like we're constantly requesting to be invited to tables. In our EDI Initiative, accessibility falls [by] the wayside. We have to consistently fight for accessibility to be considered."
Polytechnic Accessibility Advisor

Neurodivergent voices: Capturing missing policy perspectives

Neurodivergent students told us they were frustrated with the lack of influence they feel they have on institutional policies and practices. The following are some of the mechanisms they suggested to amplify their voices:

• surveys on student experience and accessibility
• neurodivergent-student representation on boards and policy committees
• neurodivergent-student advocacy roles
• increased transparency on how student concerns are considered or addressed by departments, faculties, and senates

---

3   Tamtik and Balasubramaniam, "Equity, diversity, and inclusion in Canadian colleges."
4   Dwyer and others, "Building neurodiversity-inclusive postsecondary campuses."
5   Dwyer and others.
6   Dwyer and others.

Staff, leaders, and neurodivergent students all stressed the importance of including neurodivergent voices in policy-making to enhance institutional neuroinclusivity. Staff, in particular, noted that neurodivergent PSI employees are an underutilized resource for shaping neuroinclusive policies. By combining their lived experiences with institutional knowledge, these staff hold powerful insights into the largest roadblocks experienced by neurodivergent students.

Neurodivergent students reported feeling like their institution didn't understand their experiences or challenges in navigating institutional processes. Those who held student advocacy roles also highlighted that it was challenging to have their voices heard by departmental and institutional leadership. Neurodivergent student advocates suggested an important step to enhancing neuroinclusivity at their PSI would be to increase transparency on, communication about, and accountability for how student voices and concerns are being addressed by their institution.

"[My institution] has avenues for student voices to be heard by [the] senate and to make it into policy, but none of it ever happens. Our [institution's disability advocacy group] has a seat on the broader student council and the student council has seats at the senate. A lot of things have been suggested over the years and it just keeps getting brought up again and again…. We are not being listened to."
Neurodivergent undergraduate student

Institutions benefit from creating strong mechanisms to solicit the lived experience from equity-seeking groups in order to address barriers to their participation. However, it's crucial that PSIs create safe, supportive forums where neurodivergent faculty, staff, leaders, and students feel empowered to share their insights and experiences and are listened to.[7]

Redefining who belongs in PSE

Harmful assumptions are a roadblock to neurodivergent student success

Neurodivergent students remain under-represented in PSE, partly due to persistent beliefs by some teaching faculty that their learning needs cannot be fully supported in a post-secondary classroom. While staff and leaders reported that stigma around neurodiversity is decreasing, they shared that harmful assumptions still linger. Every interview participant— students, staff, and leaders—shared a recent example of experiencing what they perceived to be stigma or discriminatory practices.

Students, staff, and leadership interview participants highlighted misconceptions about accommodations, including confusion over who is responsible for providing them and whether students are entitled to them. Some staff and leaders noted that some faculty members still resist implementing required accommodations, claiming these supports won't exist for neurodivergent students after graduation.

"I had an accommodation that said I could do the work alone, but sometimes professors don't listen because they say, 'Well, my course is designed this way,' or 'I can't accommodate you because it would penalize the whole group.' So sometimes it feels like the courses are not designed for people like me…. There are a lot of prejudices."
Neurodivergent professional-program student

"There is a knowledge gap in terms of what accommodations actually do—a misperception that they provide an unfair advantage. In reality, [for] a student who does not experience a particular barrier, having [an] accommodation would likely not make much of a difference."
College Disabilities Counsellor

---

7   Mellifont, "Ableist ivory towers."

Stigma impacts disclosure and registration with accessibility services

Less than half of neurodivergent students disclose their identity or diagnosis to their institution and register with accessibility services, with 73 per cent of the students who did not disclose their neurodivergence identifying at least one barrier to disclosure.[8] Some neurodivergent students shared that they feared disclosure may negatively impact how they are treated and limit their future opportunities; they therefore chose not to reveal their neurodivergent identity. Some who chose to not disclose or who masked their neurodivergent identities reported encountering barriers to participation, including:

- having to retake courses with a different faculty member, due to inaccessible teaching practices or course assessment structures in the first instance;
- receiving deducted marks or resigning to receive a low grade, due to an inability to complete or submit assignments on time;
- changing their program or major due to a lack of hybrid or online course options;
- being misunderstood and labelled inaccurately as "incapable," "confrontational," or "lazy" by faculty and other institutional staff.

"If I don't tell people [I'm autistic], they don't know. So, in some regard, I find that's easier than for people who are more visibly on the spectrum, because people have different expectations of you. It's a weird spot to be in because they don't see you as autistic, but they also don't see you as non-autistic. So trying to find your own accommodations [instead of disclosing] can make some things better, but depending on [what faculty you are working with], it might close other doors."
Neurodivergent undergraduate student

"We really see [a] trend in neurodivergent students over-rationalizing, over-justifying, over-apologizing when they're requesting accommodations. They're overly apologetic and want their instructors to know this isn't them, this isn't how they always are."
Assistant Director, university accessibility services

Faculty as gatekeepers to academic inclusion

Most academic advisors said that faculty often don't understand the purpose of accommodations or their role in implementing them in the classroom and within courses.

Interviewees from all three groups (students, staff, and leadership) reported challenges with faculty misconceptions about accommodations. They include some instructors' perceptions that accommodations are not needed if a student can perform well or that they are optional, at the instructor's discretion. Multiple academic advisors highlighted examples of faculty who felt they could choose whether or not to implement a student's accommodations, or who didn't understand the purpose of the required accommodation or their role in creating accessible learning environments.

"There is a dynamic where the teaching faculty assume a gatekeeper role. They say 'I know my profession. I know what the worker looks like, sounds like. They look at accommodations running contrary to what the profession is, what's expected. And then you've got an accessibility office saying, well, why aren't they just on board? Well, because you're not connecting the dots for them. We educate faculty on myths about accessibility. We help them understand that their role as faculty is not gatekeepers of their profession."
Director, college accessibility services

The most challenging accommodations to implement are those that raised faculty concerns about their intellectual property and privacy rights in relation to course content and course-based learning materials. Both students and staff noted that faculty were most often hesitant about accommodating students who required note-taking support, distributing slide decks in advance, and recording their lectures.

---

8   Fane, *Making the Invisible Visible.*

"We have tried to implement different [note-taking] strategies, but realistically, it's us putting a call out to the class and asking if anybody wants to share their notes. We have trialled recording software, but we run into arguments with faculty on whether student accommodations trump faculty privacy and intellectual property rights. At the end of the day, usually there's no grounds to those arguments. But they take up so much time that the students end up just dropping the class and moving on to something else."

University Academic Advisor

Faculty are also often unaware of relevant accessibility legislation and their obligations to provide reasonable accommodations to students.[9] Staff and leaders emphasized the need for clear faculty directives on implementing reasonable accommodations and a formal institutional process for addressing instances where a student's right to accommodation is not being upheld within individual courses and programs.

A strategy shared by academic advisors to address the lack of faculty knowledge is to build relationships with teaching faculty and develop language for faculty to use when responding to students about their learning needs and accommodation requests. Structured language/templates have helped faculty in responding more supportively to students and have encouraged them to seek assistance from accessibility services on how to implement accommodations, rather than dismissing a student's learning needs.

9   Rao, "Faculty attitudes and students with disabilities in higher education."

Addressing stigma and measuring outcomes

Neurodiversity awareness training

Offering both in-person and online neurodiversity training for PSI employees, leaders, and students helps build greater acceptance of neurodiversity.[10] Interview participants suggested the following focus areas for creating customized training and professional development opportunities:

Focus areas for faculty training:
- neuro-affirming teaching practices
- universal design for learning (UDL)
- reasonable accommodation and the duty to accommodate
- collaborative approaches to working with accessibility services
- compassionate communication when engaging with neurodivergent students
- supports and services available for neurodivergent students

Focus areas for staff and service-workers training:
- neurodiversity awareness
- supports and services available for neurodivergent students
- compassionate communication when engaging with neurodivergent students
- appropriate responses and courses of action to support neurodivergent students in crisis

Focus areas for students and student-employee training:
- neurodiversity awareness
- supports and services available for neurodivergent students
- compassionate communication with neurodiverse peers
- ways to be an ally

Training and professional development materials should include input from neurodivergent individuals as well as experts in neurodiversity and neuroinclusive practices.[11]

"I would like to see greater awareness from faculty about neurodiversity and disability, and that the roles and responsibilities of students, advisors, and faculty are clearly defined to avoid misunderstandings."
University graduate student

Evaluating progress

A few leaders highlighted the need to track, measure, and evaluate the progress of neurodiversity initiatives and accessibility services when discussing the policy and practice changes they saw as essential for increasing neuroinclusivity. These interview participants stressed the importance of developing processes to evaluate accessibility-focused initiatives and student outcomes for those registered with accessibility services. Benchmarking, measuring, and monitoring progress and outcomes of neurodivergent students can identify areas where additional supports or different approaches are needed in order to improve graduation rates for equity-seeking students.[12]

"In [accessibility services], we are doing excellent work, but we're not measuring it, we've never had to. We've been doing our very best, but until we start measuring outcomes, we're floundering in the dark. We're doing things that we think feel good with no evidence they're contributing to positive outcomes. We need to measure GPAs [grade point averages], retention, graduation rates, withdrawals, and failure rates based on what accommodations we're providing for students. And we're not doing that. Nobody's really doing that."
College EDI Manager

---

10 Dwyer and others, "Building neurodiversity-inclusive postsecondary campuses."
11 Quigley and others, "Neurodiversity and third-level education."
12 Salmi and D'Addio, "Policies for achieving inclusion in higher education."

Ongoing barriers to participation for neurodivergent students

Registering with accessibility services

Three-quarters of the neurodivergent students we surveyed who did not disclose their neurodivergent identity or diagnosis to their PSI identified at least one barrier to the disclosure process.[13] The survey participants and interviewees identified the following barriers and challenges to disclosure and registering with accessibility services:

- a lack of knowledge about disclosure and registration processes
- a lack of knowledge of eligibility requirements for registration
- difficulty obtaining a clinical diagnosis or sufficient documentation
- fear or anxiety about the disclosure and registration process
- internalized stigma or shame about requesting accommodations
- lengthy wait times or uncertain timelines around access to assessments and accommodations

"Once I started seeking accommodations, I realized that what I was experiencing was way more difficult than [what neurotypical] students were experiencing, and that it did not need to be this difficult. I felt like I had a lot of shame in accessing these services, because I was like, 'Oh, I don't need it. It's fine.' But then once I finally actually did, I was like, 'Oh, yes, I needed it!' It made such a big difference."
Neurodivergent PhD candidate

"What's been really frustrating for me is just navigating the system. It's actually very non-inclusive. It takes a lot of time to get registered with Accessibility Services. That took me a solid five, six months … to get this psychiatric evaluation, go back to the doctor, two, three times, and then finally I got registered. And then it was like a four-, five-, six-week wait until I could get the appointment."
University graduate student

The majority of PSI staff and leaders identified similar challenges to the registration process. Staff and leaders noted that navigating complex registration systems is particularly difficult for neurodivergent students, who experience greater challenges with communication and executive-function skills than their neurotypical peers. Several staff and leaders identified mechanisms to reduce barriers to disclosure and registration including:

- streamlining the registration process for students, to reduce paperwork and remove barriers to registration;
- offering on-campus assessments or direct referrals to clinicians, to help more students access formal assessments and documentation;
- co-locating accessibility services with student wellness and/or student services, to reduce stigma for students wanting to access accessibility services.

"The registration process requires documentation and filling out certain forms and doing it within a timeline…. It requires a heavy degree of executive function, which when we're talking about a student with ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder], presents [a] challenge…. We're looking at ways of removing all of that, so that the student can do the intake [in] ways that make sense to them."
Manager, university accessibility services

---

13 Fane, *Making the Invisible Visible*.

Inflexible institutional processes and timelines

Students, staff, and leaders highlighted a lack of flexibility within PSI processes and timelines as a significant barrier to neuroinclusivity. Ensuring systems and processes are flexible can help PSIs provide more accessible and inclusive education, which will become more important as the enrolment of under-represented groups increases.[14]

Examples of inflexible processes and timelines included:

- a lack of information available before courses or programs start (such as updated syllabi and student handbooks) for students to determine a program's or course's fit based on their learning and accommodation needs;
- deadlines to drop or withdraw from courses set within weeks of the start of the semester, preventing students from adequately assessing whether the course's pace and assessment structure fit their learning needs;
- deadlines set far in advance (a week or more) for students to access alternate exams settings;
- barriers and stigma related to taking a reduced course load, particularly in trades and professional programs, where availability may be limited;
- a lack of online and hybrid course options within programs for students with episodic or changing accessibility needs.

"Imagine you're a student with ADHD and part of your diagnosis is struggling with follow-through or time management. Now, you have to register every single one of your tests seven days in advance or you can't write [them] with your accommodations—that is a barrier. I understand why offices have those things in place, but it still is a barrier to many of our students."
University Accessibility Advisor and Learning Strategist

Barriers in the built environment: Considering sensory needs

Many neurodivergent individuals experience sensory sensitivities, and their needs are often overlooked in PSE. Several staff and accessibility advisors highlighted successful initiatives at their institutions, including dedicated low-sensory spaces, rooms offering both calming and stimulating sensory options, and sensory-regulation stations across campus.

Supporting neurodivergent students requires more than granting academic accommodations—it involves addressing sensory needs to ensure that campus experiences are not undermined by sensory overload.

"I feel like so much attention goes towards physical disability, and that's important. But I don't think there's any consideration for people who are neurodivergent and what a safe place for me looks like. If I get overwhelmed by noise, I have to go home—times [when] I've not been able to be in a class because the lights are too bright or the speakers are playing at level 500. And now I'm overwhelmed. So having [low-sensory spaces] is something that my school can do to make it more inclusive."
Neurodivergent college student

Enhancing institutional knowledge and practice

Integrating services and supports to enhance neuroinclusivity

Traditionally, PSI accessibility-services departments have been responsible for supporting students with disabilities and their accessibility needs.[15] In this model, advisors typically work with students who have disclosed their disability and have provided the necessary documentation to register for accommodations.[16] However, the majority of staff and leadership stated that this approach makes it difficult to support students who don't have access to clinical assessments.

"There needs to be a concerted and integrated approach to supports. It's not just the accessibility office, it's the student wellness office, it's the student rights and responsibilities office, [and] it's the EDI office working together. It's all of us working together to create supports and programming and an experience for students. Because sometimes the perception is the accessibility office owns it, owns the student experience. But accessibility is everyone's responsibility."

Polytechnic Lead Advisor

University of Calgary's neuroinclusivity initiative

The University of Calgary's Neurodiversity Support Office is one example of how services for neurodivergent students can be centralized to provide integrated supports. It operates as an integrated support hub for neurodivergent-identifying students and does not require students to have a diagnosis or register with accessibility services to access its services. Key features and supports include:

- neurodiversity-support advising appointments
- neurodiversity drop-in advising
- neuroinclusive workshops and education training
- neuro-affirming peer-support programming
- sensory-friendly student lounge

---

15 Mendoza-González and others, "Guidelines to establish an office of student accessibility services in higher education institutions."

16 Lester and others, "Policing neurodiversity in higher education."

Building pathways to share institutional knowledge

PSIs hold a wealth of expertise on neurodiversity and neuroinclusion beyond accessibility services. Key areas include counselling and wellbeing services, centres for teaching and learning, and departments like critical disability studies and psychology. To effectively share institutional expertise, PSIs can facilitate opportunities for cross-institutional knowledge-sharing and capacity-building across the campus communities in Canada. Effective strategies that staff and leaders identified at their institutions included:

Cross-institutional appointments

• offer secondments to faculty to work in accessibility services and on inclusion initiatives to incorporate their insights and develop faculty-driven solutions to challenges neurodivergent students face when working with faculty;

• embed accessibility advisors within faculties to strengthen relationships with faculty and department heads, while building specialized knowledge of accessibility needs in each department.

Peer-to-peer faculty support

• create opportunities for faculty to share their innovative approaches to accessibility, student support, or UDL within their discipline with colleagues;

• launch an initiative allowing faculty to apply for release time and mentorship to redesign a course using UDL principles, after which participating faculty can share key learnings, materials, and strategies with colleagues.

Kwantlen Polytechnic University's neuroinclusivity initiative

Kwantlen Polytechnic University has developed a for-credit, fully inclusive pathway for students with disabilities, including those who identify as neurodivergent, to learn alongside their neurotypical and/or non-disabled peers. Instead of adapting existing courses for students with accessibility needs, the Including All Citizens Pathway uses a UDL approach to re-design teaching and learning approaches and assessment strategies to be inclusive for all students. Participating faculty receive release time and mentorship to redesign their course using UDL principles before and throughout the teaching semester. This process creates inclusive, accessible courses without requiring individual accommodations for students—enhancing inclusion for all students.

Impactful supports for neurodivergent students

Increasing access to comprehensive mental healthcare

Continuous and neuroinclusive mental health services during the transition from high school to PSE are crucial for neurodivergent students.[17] Many neurodivergent students are young adults learning to navigate PSE and their studies with significantly more independence than when they were in elementary and secondary schooling.[18] Neurodivergent students who are transitioning from high school to PSE may also experience an abrupt change in their healthcare providers or a disruption to services, as they age out of pediatric care and take on further decision-making duties in relation to their healthcare needs.[19]

The neurodivergent students we surveyed identified counselling services as the most-desired support.[20] In interviews, students shared challenges they encountered navigating mental health services on campus, services and offerings they found helpful, and what was lacking. Students, staff, and leaders made the following recommendations to improve mental health services:

- train staff in neuro-affirming approaches to mental health support;
- provide access to on-campus neuro-affirming clinicians who can provide a full suite of supports (including clinical counselling, assessments and documentation of the student's functional limitations) and who can communicate directly with accessibility services, if desired by the student;

- offer one-on-one services and group-therapy options for students;
- provide both in-person and remote options for mental health services;
- co-locate mental health, accessibility, and student services to enhance collaboration and ease navigation for students;
- develop an institutional mental health strategy that includes a focus on accessibility and neurodiversity, with measurable goals to assess impact and effectiveness.

"I think that the counselling offices should be prepared to guide students who think they might be neurodivergent [through the process] and have connections with places that diagnose to help me get some paperwork so I can access the supports that they do have. Otherwise, it's an inaccessible accessibility office."

Neurodivergent college student

"Accessing [my school's] mental health services was really difficult. I joined a weekly therapy group, which was helpful in a sense. And I enjoyed that because it was consistent. It was familiar faces. That was actually the only form of community that I felt during university."

Neurodivergent university student

17   Malik-Soni and others, "Tackling healthcare access barriers for individuals with autism from diagnosis to adulthood."

18   Hadley, "College students with disabilities."

19   Ames and others, "Opportunities for inclusion and engagement in the transition of autistic youth from pediatric to adult healthcare."

20   Fane, *Making the Invisible Visible.*

Building community

Many neurodivergent students reported often facing challenges with social interactions in PSE, including completing group work, solving conflicts, making friends, and building community. Students, staff, and leaders reported a range of services and opportunities they feel are valuable social and emotional supports currently being offered at their institutions:

- peer coaches
- departmental or program student representatives
- student wellness ambassadors
- peer-mentorship programs
- transition to PSE supports and programs
- student social clubs and activities (in-person and online)
- student support groups (in-person and online)
- neurodiversity support groups and forums accessible for all campus members

"Social groups where you can just talk about your challenges. Where you can share strategies that are working with peers. I think that would be a great resource. It could help improve your sense of belonging at school because people can feel really lonely."
University undergraduate student

Access to peer-support programs is an evidenced-based strategy to supporting neurodivergent students.[21] Additionally, neurodivergent students shared that opportunities to make broader social connections via support or social groups helped make their PSE experience feel more inclusive.

However, a few staff and leaders highlighted that they encountered significant administrative challenges to running peer and social programs including:

- inadequate training for peer mentors and a lack of clarity on the scope of the peer-mentorship program for mentors, mentees, and administrators overseeing the program;
- a lack of knowledge about neurodiversity and the needs of neurodivergent students by neurotypical peers;
- challenges related to scheduling and highly varied student schedules.

Staff and leaders involved in initiating or running peer and social programs for neurodivergent students emphasized the need for neurodiversity training for peer mentors. They found that offering social clubs and groups at various times, both in-person and online, significantly improved student access to support services.

---

21 Fotheringham and others, "Co-designing a neurodivergent student-led peer support programme for neurodivergent young people in mainstream high schools."

Algonquin College's neuroinclusivity initiative

Algonquin College's Transition Support Centre (TSC) provides autistic students with academic, social, and independent-living support. The TSC recognizes that neurodivergent students can excel but often need personalized support during their transition to post-secondary education. As a "one-stop shop," the TSC offers neuro-affirming guidance in a welcoming, sensory-friendly environment, delivered by staff and advisors with extensive experience working with autistic students.

Offering study and executive-function skill development

Neurodivergent students reported executive-function challenges far more frequently than any other barrier and benefit from targeted supports.[22] Several students shared that ADHD or executive-function coaching and study skills workshops were either valuable supports for their PSE participation that they had accessed or supports that students desired access to. Participating in executive function and study skill development helps neurodivergent students to better understand their own unique learning profile, supporting them to address challenges and leverage strengths.

"I think a common misunderstanding in post-secondary education is that ADHD is a problem of focus, when really, it's a problem of motivation and barriers to establishing tasks. So I think that the study skills class I took as part of my reduced course load [pathway] really helped me form strategies to work around that and improve my time management, which is really hard for someone with ADHD."
University undergraduate student

"Getting support has been a challenge. Access to ADHD coaching would be fantastic. I am trying to find those resources and find ways of how to pay for them because coaching isn't covered under any of our extended health benefits."
Mature-aged college diploma student

The majority of staff and leadership interview participants shared that their institution had developed programming and materials to support study and executive-function skill development. Offerings and opportunities that they felt supported students in addressing executive-function gaps included:

- workshops on study skills and maintaining focus/attention;
- access to learning strategists;
- access to executive-functioning/ADHD coaching;
- study-skills courses and groups;
- templates for task management and strategies to prevent procrastination;
- information and access to assistive technology that address student executive-function challenges/gaps;
- educational resources on ADHD and common challenges experienced by neurodivergent students.

Offering executive-function resources and supports that do not require registration with accessibility services was also identified by several staff members as a key strategy for supporting students who faced barriers to the registration process.

---

22 Fane, *Making the Invisible Visible*; and Hartung and others, "A new organizational and study skills intervention for college students with ADHD."

Methodology

Aggregate terms used in this report

Table 1
Aggregate terms used in this report

Aggregate terms	Percentage
Some/a few/several	<30
Many	30–40
Almost half	41–49
Half	50
Most/majority/over half	over 50

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Understanding neurodiversity in PS

This project was developed to better understand the barriers and enablers to neurodivergent students' participation and inclusion in PSE. The study employed a mixed-methods research design and was conducted in two stages.

A national survey was completed by 400 neurodivergent post-secondary students and recent graduates from Canadian institutions. The survey included multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions.

Semi-structured interviews were held with 45 neurodivergent students and recent graduates, along with 33 staff and leaders working in the areas of accessibility services and EDI in post-secondary institutions across Canada.

The findings from the national survey were published in the report Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education.[1] This report primarily focuses on the qualitative interview data.

Ethics

The research design and protocols were reviewed and approved by Veritas, a third-party independent research ethics board. Interview and survey responses were anonymous and participants were guaranteed confidentiality.

Identifying expert individuals

To gain deeper contextual knowledge on the neuroinclusivity of Canadian PSE, we sought 75 one-on-one interviews with individuals with lived experiences as neurodivergent students (current students and recent graduates) and post-secondary staff/leaders in accessibility services. These included individuals attending, graduated from, or working at universities, colleges, and polytechnics across Canada.

Interview recruitment

The research team sent email invitations to potential interviewees over a three-month period (April–July 2024). In total, 252 individuals were contacted by email for participation in the study. Of these, 78 participated. The response rate was 31 per cent.

To build the recruitment list, we generated contacts from:

- inviting neurodivergent students and recent graduates who completed the online survey and elected to be contacted by email for a qualitative interview (127 contacts generated, of which 26 participated);
- sharing recruitment information for student participants via social media (i.e., LinkedIn, Facebook) and asking networks to reshare (32 contacts generated, of which 19 participated);
- conducting internet searches of publicly available email addresses for staff and leaders working in accessibility services in Canadian public PSIs (over 1,000 contacts generated, of which 81 were emailed study recruitment materials, and 24 participated);
- sharing recruitment materials for accessibility-services staff and leaders via LinkedIn and through the research team's and Research Advisory Board's (see "Acknowledgements") professional networks (12 contacts generated, of which 8 participated).

Target interviews by subpopulation

We sought interview participants (neurodivergent students/recent graduates and accessibility-services staff and leaders) from universities, colleges, and polytechnics across Canada.

---

1   Fane, *Making the Invisible Visible.*

Students and recent graduates

Current students and recent graduates (<2 years since graduation) from Canadian PSIs who identify as neurodivergent (either due to a formal diagnosis or self-identification) were invited to participate.

PSI staff and leadership

Individuals who hold staff or leadership roles in accessibility services or EDI at Canadian public PSIs were invited to participate. PSI staff recruited for this study held roles such as accessibility advisors, learning strategists, disability advisors/counsellors, and accessibility-services coordinators. PSI leadership recruited for this study included individuals who held manager, assistant director, or director roles in units/portfolios such as accessibility services, student wellbeing, counselling and careers, and EDI.

The target number of participants from each province was proportional to each province's population in the overall Canadian population. Interviews were conducted in English or French, depending on participant preference. See charts 2–8 and tables 2 and 3 below for the final breakdown of participants by province, institution type, role type (staff and leadership), diagnosis/identity, and gender identity.

Interview demographics—neurodivergent students and recent graduates

Chart 2

Participating students and recent graduates—neurodivergent identity/diagnosis
(number of participants, n = 45)
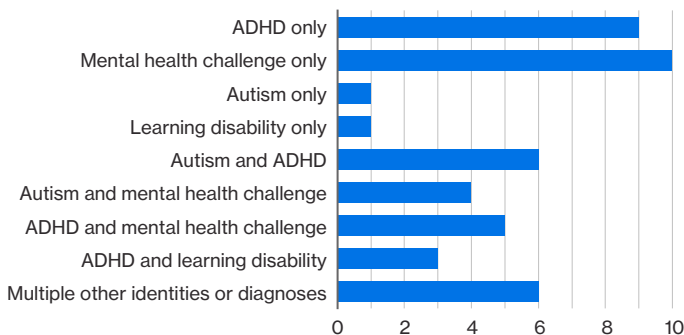
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 3

Participating students and recent graduates—gender identity
(percentage of participants, n = 45)
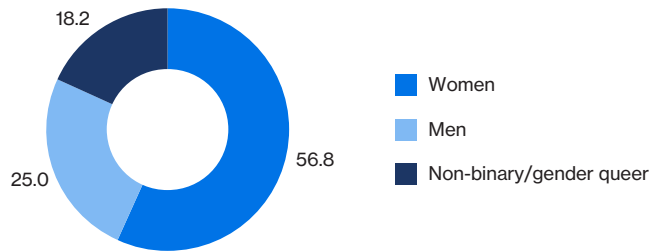
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Table 2

Participating students and recent graduates—province of residence
(number of participants, n = 45)

Province	Number of participants
Alberta	10
British Columbia	8
Newfoundland and Labrador	1
Ontario	19
Quebec	6
Saskatchewan	1

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 4

Participating students and recent graduates—institution type

(percentage of participants, n = 45)

28.9

71.1

■ University
■ College/Polytechnic

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Interview demographics—accessibility-services staff and leadership

Chart 5

Staff and Leadership Gender identity

(percentage of participants, n = 33)

3.0

24.2

72.7

■ Women
■ Men
■ Non-binary
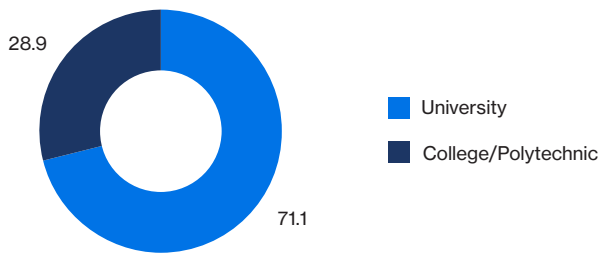
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 6

Staff and Leadership Neurodivergent or disabled identifying

(percentage of participants, n = 33)

48.5

51.5

■ Identifies as neurodivergent or having a disability

■ Identifies as neurotypical/non-disabled
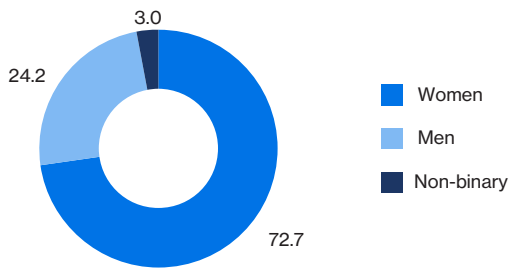
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Table 3

Participating staff and leaders—institution by province

(number of participants, n = 33)

Province	Number
Alberta	6
British Columbia	5
Manitoba	2
New Brunswick	1
Newfoundland and Labrador	1
Nova Scotia	2
Ontario	11
Prince Edward Island	3
Quebec	2

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 7

Participating staff and leaders — institution type

(percentage of participants, n = 33)

- 24.2
- 45.5
- 30.3

- University
- College
- Polytechnic
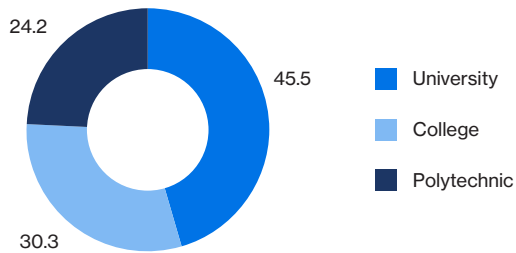
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 8

Participating staff and leaders — role type

(percentage of participants, n = 33)

- 51.5
- 48.5

- Staff
- Leadership
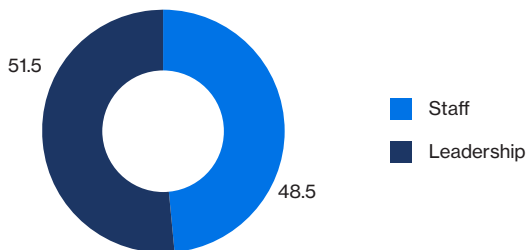
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Qualitative analysis

The research team conducted virtual interviews between May and July 2024. Interviews lasted approximately 30–60 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, yielding 781 pages (482,288 words) of text.

Interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Coding themes were first developed based on the research questions and a literature review, followed by an exploratory examination within interviews. Inter-rater reliability was measured using the Kappa statistic. The Kappa coefficient was 0.82. Themes were examined based on how frequently they were noted as well as the intensity of the observation.

Semi-structured interview questions

The interview guides were developed based on the existing literature and in conjunction with our Research Advisory Board. (See "Acknowledgements.")

Sample interview questions for neurodivergent students and recent graduates included:

1. Can you tell me a little about your experience in post-secondary education?
2. Have you faced any challenges related to being a neurodivergent student?
3. Has there been a time where you experienced a process or requirement at your institution that seemed unfair or unduly difficult for you as a neurodivergent student?
4. Who or what have been important supports for you at your post-secondary institution?
5. Can you tell me about your experiences sharing your accommodations with teaching faculty and professors?

Sample interview questions for PSI staff and leadership included:

1. During your time working in disability/accessibility services, has the understanding of neurodiversity changed?
2. Have you noticed any barriers that neurodivergent students are facing at your institution?
3. Are there any supports, resources, or programs specifically for neurodivergent students at your institution? If so, what are they?
4. Have you found any gaps in knowledge or practice at your institution in relation to neurodiversity that make your work challenging?
5. Do you think that neurodiversity is adequately considered and represented in your institution's equity, diversity, and inclusion strategic planning and policies?

Appendix B

Bibliography

Ames, Jennifer L., Arjun Mahajan, Meghan N. Davignon, Maria L. Massolo, and Lisa A. Croen. "Opportunities for inclusion and engagement in the transition of autistic youth from pediatric to adult healthcare: a qualitative study." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 53, no. 5 (2023): 1850–61.

Clouder, Lynn, Mehmet Karakus, Alessia Cinotti, María Virginia Ferreyra, Genoveva Amador Fierros, and Patricia Rojo. "Neurodiversity in higher education: a narrative synthesis." *Higher Education* 80, no. 4 (2020): 757–78.

Fane, Jennifer. *Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education.* Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2024.

Dwyer, Patrick, Erica Mineo, Kristin Mifsud, Chris Lindholm, Ava Gurba, and T. C. Waisman. "Building neurodiversity-inclusive postsecondary campuses: Recommendations for leaders in higher education." *Autism in Adulthood* 5, no. 1 (2023): 1–14.

eCampus Ontario. *Improving Flexibility in Postsecondary Education - Flexibility Brief 5: Integrated Insights.* https://www.ecampusontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Flexibility-Briefs-5-EN.pdf.

Fotheringham, Francesca, Katie Cebula, Sue Fletcher-Watson, Sarah Foley, and Catherine J. Crompton. "Co-designing a neurodivergent student-led peer support programme for neurodivergent young people in mainstream high schools." *Neurodiversity* 1 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330231205770.

Hadley, Wanda M. "College students with disabilities: A student development perspective." *New Directions for Higher Education* 2011, no. 154 (2011): 77–81.

Hamilton, L. G., and S. Petty. "Compassionate pedagogy for neurodiversity in higher education: A conceptual analysis." *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1093290.

Hartung, Cynthia M., Will H. Canu, Judah W. Serrano, John M. Vasko, Anne E. Stevens, Tamara M. Abu-Ramadan, Elizabeth A. Bodalski and others. "A new organizational and study skills intervention for college students with ADHD." *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 29, no. 2 (2022): 411–24.

Hutchison, Jane. *Breaking Down Barriers: Improving the Workplace Experience for Neurodivergent Canadians.* Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2023.

Lester, Jessica Nina, Hannah Dostal, and Rachael Gabriel. "Policing neurodiversity in higher education: A discourse analysis of the talk surrounding accommodations for university students." *Ethics and Neurodiversity* (2013): 52–66.

Malik-Soni, Natasha, Andrew Shaker, Helen Luck, Anne E. Mullin, Ryan E. Wiley, M. E. Lewis, Joaquin Fuentes, and Thomas W. Frazier. "Tackling healthcare access barriers for individuals with autism from diagnosis to adulthood." *Pediatric Research* 91, no. 5 (2022): 1028–35.

Mellifont, D. "Ableist ivory towers: A narrative review informing about the lived experiences of neurodivergent staff in contemporary higher education." *Disability & Society* 38, no. 5 (2023): 865–86.

Mendoza-González, Ricardo, Sergio Luján-Mora, Salvador Otón-Tortosa, Mary Sánchez-Gordón, Mario Alberto Rodríguez-Díaz, and Ricardo Emmanuel Reyes-Acosta. "Guidelines to establish an office of student accessibility services in higher education institutions." *Sustainability* 14, no. 5 (2022): 2635.

Newman, L., M. Wagner, R. Cameto, and A.-M. Knokey. *The Post-High School Outcomes of Youth With Disabilities up to 4 Years After High School. A Report of Findings From the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (NCSER 2009-3017).* Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2009. www.nlts2.org/reports/2009_04/nlts2_report_2009_04_complete.pdf.

Quigley, Etain, Molly O'Hanlon, Martha Brandes, Rowan Kennedy, and Blánaid Gavin. "Neurodiversity and third-level education: A lacuna between the strength-based paradigm shift and the lived experience." *Neurodiversity* 2 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330241277427.

Rao, S. "Faculty attitudes and students with disabilities in higher education: A literature review." *College Student Journal* 38, no. 4 (2004): 19198.

Singer, J. "Why Can't You Be Normal for Once in Your Life? From a 'Problem with No Name' to a New Category of Disability." In *Disability Discourse,* edited by M. Corker and S. French, 59–67. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999.

Salmi, Jamil, and Anna D'Addio. "Policies for achieving inclusion in higher education." *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (2021): 47–72.

Tamtik, Merli, and Puvi Balasubramaniam. "Equity, diversity, and inclusion in Canadian colleges: examining definitions and unveiling perceptions." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 48, no. 7 (2024): 714–26.

Acknowledgements

The Conference
Board of Canada

Where insights meet impact