



Advancing Career Services

Supporting Post-Secondary Career Professionals in a Changing Job Market

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and Signal49 Research, and are funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

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Contents

4

Key findings

5

New realities of career development professionals

6

Challenges in delivering effective career support

13

Actionable insights to strengthen career services

15

Appendix A: Methodology

17

Appendix B: Bibliography

Key findings

- Many career development professionals (CDPs) are facing rising student anxiety and declining perceptions of graduates' work readiness, often without adequate professional development. This can contribute to feelings of overwork and emotional burnout.
- Despite this, post-secondary institutions do not always provide clarity on scope of practice for CDPs, particularly related to student wellbeing. This leads to role tension, hidden work, and misaligned workload models.
- Practitioners who are expected to support an increasingly diverse student population with unique career needs require specialized knowledge and resources; these responsibilities can't be managed effectively without additional support.
- CDPs recognize that labour market information is essential for guiding students. But fragmented, outdated, or inaccessible data—especially in smaller, rural, or fast-changing regions—limits their ability to provide timely, actionable career advice.
- AI is transforming career pathways, but limited AI literacy, training, and institutional coordination leave students underprepared and CDPs stretched, reducing the scalability, confidence, and effectiveness of AI-informed career guidance.



New realities of career development professionals

Post-secondary career development professionals (CDPs) play an important role in helping students transition into the workforce. But their work is becoming increasingly complex.

As labour markets continue to rapidly evolve, shaped by technological disruption, shifting employer expectations, and intensifying competition for meaningful employment, CDPs are expected to provide more specialized, timely, and individualized guidance than ever before.¹

To understand how CDPs are navigating this evolving landscape, we conducted interviews with 40 practitioners working in colleges, universities, and polytechnics across Canada. The findings revealed consistent challenges: unclear or fragmented institutional structures; escalating student mental-health concerns impacting career decision-making; and a lack of shared standards and support for delivering inclusive, high-quality services.

Based on these insights, we identify several key opportunities for post-secondary and career services leaders to address these challenges. At a time when institutions face increasing scrutiny over graduate outcomes and program relevance, strengthening career services represents a strategic lever for improving student success, institutional credibility, and economic growth.²



¹ Bimrose and Goddard, *The Career Development Profession in Canada*; Côté, Olsen, and Hirsch-Allen, *Navigating Canada's Messy Education and Training Marketplace*; Future Skills Centre, "Career development professional centre."

² Chatoor and others, *Navigating the Transition From School to Work*.

Challenges in delivering effective career support

Managing student anxiety and career readiness

When asked what is top of mind for CDPs today, the majority of interview participants highlighted two pressing issues: declining perceptions of graduates' work readiness and a significant rise in student anxiety. They described students arriving at career advising sessions feeling overwhelmed and unsure about their job prospects. Many struggle to see how their education connects to employment, question whether their skills align with employer expectations, and feel intimidated by an increasingly competitive and unpredictable job market.

These trends align with 2023 findings that 66.5 per cent of Ontario post-secondary students reported a decline in their mental health since starting post-secondary education, with 58 per cent of respondents experiencing symptoms of depression and 42.2 per cent experiencing daily general anxiety.³

The CDPs we spoke to described how the resulting pressure to balance student mental health challenges and wellbeing with effective career guidance means they are taking on responsibilities beyond their training.

“People are getting burnt out because of the topics [such as mental health and the changing landscape of work] that we’re trying to navigate in our own lives alongside students. The work is heavily empathy-driven and demanding; [the resulting] emotional burnout is very real.”

Career educator and coach, university career services

CDPs expressed mixed views about the role of student wellbeing in career advising. Some emphasized workforce preparation as their primary mandate and felt that addressing emotional or personal concerns detracts from this work, while others viewed wellbeing as integral to students' career success. These differences largely reflect uneven training backgrounds: a small number of practitioners have mental health expertise, while most do not.

“When it comes to supporting students, an important part of the work is creating a space where they can talk about what they are experiencing. This includes the questions they have, the fears they carry, and the narratives they are hearing. Providing that space helps them feel supported in a way that strengthens their overall career development.”

Career development manager, university career services

³ Moghimi and others, “Mental health challenges, treatment experiences, and care needs.”

This expansion of the career advising role is not new. Many career development practitioners have had to incorporate counselling-informed approaches and mental health training into their work to better support today's students.⁴

But recognition of this expanded role has not yet translated into systemic solutions. Many CDPs reported lacking the formal skills, training, or support needed to confidently deliver these services, resulting in wide variations in practice within and across institutions. This inconsistency shapes uneven student experiences and creates unequal workload pressures, particularly where mental health-related work remains informal or under-resourced.

“A lot of my appointments that should be career counselling are more focused on those survival things. I’m making a lot of referrals to counselling and accessibility because I’ll identify that it’s more of a mental health issue, but there’s not a lot of supports for that.”
Career services consultant, college career services

Addressing these challenges requires workload models that reflect the full scope and complexity of career advising, including protected time for individualized student support and ongoing professional development. Interview participants also emphasized the importance of stronger, more intentional connections between career services and other student supports—particularly mental health services and academic advising—to better integrate services, reduce student stress, and ensure timely, appropriate support.

Addressing diverse learners’ needs

As Canadian college and university campuses become more diverse,⁵ CDPs are tasked with supporting a growing number of students whose pathways to employment are shaped by unique structural, cultural, and systemic factors.



4 Frigerio and Rix, “Career development and coaching”; Graduate Futures Institute, “Resources.”

5 Prymak, “Key Trends Shaping Enrollment in Canadian Universities”; Universities Canada, *Equity, diversity and inclusion at Canadian universities*.

Meeting the unique needs of diverse student groups

CDPs identified several unique needs requiring specialized knowledge and resourcing that arise when supporting diverse student groups:

International students: These students often need guidance navigating work-permit restrictions, overcoming language barriers, expanding limited professional networks, and addressing employer biases favouring “Canadian experience.”

Indigenous students: These students require culturally grounded career services that acknowledge and address the misalignment between mainstream career models and the values, traditions, and expectations of Indigenous communities.

Students with disabilities and neurodivergent learners: Inflexible work environments, lack of accommodations, and limited employer awareness about the specific challenges these students face can all limit their career pathways.⁶ Addressing these barriers requires specialized training, tools, and stronger partnerships with employers to create more inclusive work-integrated learning opportunities and tailored career advice. To support this effort, we released a three-part resource series that CDPs can download and share with employers and students to:

- [strengthen neuroinclusive advising practices;](#)
- [advocate for neuroinclusive work-integrated learning placements;](#)
- [better prepare neurodivergent students to navigate and succeed in work-integrated learning and employment contexts.](#)

⁶ Fane, *Creating their own path*; Hutchinson, *Breaking Down Barriers*.

Addressing these unique needs is too much for CDPs to take on alone. Some interviewees shared that their team collaborates with specialized units, such as international student offices, accessibility services, or Indigenous student services, to develop and deliver information, supports, and resources tailored to identified student needs.

However, many CDPs report that they continue to operate in silos, particularly those working in smaller or rural institutions who may not have access to the specialized staff or expertise required to offer this type of integrated support.

Without specialized expertise, or when collaboration is difficult to establish and maintain, many participants reported struggling to meet diverse students’ needs.

“There aren’t enough resources to truly support Indigenous students. We keep striving to partner with the Indigenous office on campus, as [Indigenous student] needs are deeply unique, and right now, we’re not equipped to meet them.”

Career development advisor, university career services



Career pathways for neurodivergent students – University of Toronto

The University of Toronto created a [workshop series](#) to help neurodivergent students develop career goals, navigate the job search process, and explore what to do after graduation, using inclusive and affirming approaches.

This series is made up of six workshops offered via in-person or hybrid delivery covering the following topics:

- knowing yourself and career exploration
- networking and building a community of support
- disclosure and accommodation in the job search and at the workplace
- next actions as you work toward your career goals

Barriers to building employer relationships

Career services bridge students to employment, and participants emphasized work-integrated learning (WIL) as a key pathway to real-world work experience. However, many reported that their institutions rely too heavily on co-operative education (co-op) programs as the primary WIL model. As a result, co-op offices often control employer relationships and placement opportunities.

Career advisors reported that this gatekeeping leaves them without access to institutional employer contacts, limiting support for students outside co-op programs and reducing employers' awareness of how CDPs can help meet their hiring needs.

“Employer engagement is our biggest gap. With few co-op programs and no dedicated staff for industry outreach, students miss out on practical experience. Limited funding and a research-focused culture make connecting students to employers a major challenge.”

Career centre director, university career services

Additionally, career practitioners reported feeling excluded from key initiatives such as career fairs and employer databases, which are also often managed by co-op offices or individual academic departments. As professionals dedicated to connecting students with work opportunities, CDPs believe they have a valuable role to play in strengthening employer relationships across the institution.

Many participants emphasized the need for a coordinated, institution-wide employer engagement strategy to ensure that strong, sustainable employer connections benefit students across all programs, not just a select few.

“The biggest challenge is still helping students transition successfully from academics into their careers. Students do everything we ask—build skills, polish resumés—but employers aren’t always seeing or valuing that. We need stronger employer connections so students can show what they bring and employers can recognize it.”

Co-operative education specialist, college career services

The struggle to access labour market information

Career advisors emphasized the critical importance of labour market information (LMI) in helping students make informed decisions in a rapidly changing economy. When it is accessible and relevant, CDPs use LMI to connect academic learning with employment opportunities and provide realistic guidance on skills demand and job prospects.

Despite noting its value, relatively few interview participants reported using LMI regularly. They stressed that this gap reflects barriers to access, relevance, and usability—not a lack of interest. Practitioners said available data is often fragmented, outdated, overly technical, or misaligned with the local and regional labour markets their students are preparing to enter. These challenges are especially acute in smaller or rural institutions, where CDPs most often reported limited access to paid tools, dedicated analysts, or institutional capacity to interpret labour market data.

“...by the time you’re looking at the [labour market] information, it’s already past the projection window ... having the information be timely, understanding the methodology and where the information was gathered or where it’s coming from can be tricky.”

Counselling therapist, university career services

Gaps in available information were particularly evident in fastchanging sectors such as clean energy, AI, autonomous vehicles, and cybersecurity, where the pace of innovation outstrips publicly accessible data. As a result, many advisors felt underprepared to support students interested in emerging opportunities or futurefocused skills. Supporting international students adds further complexity, as reliable, comparable global LMI remains difficult to access.

Participants highlighted the need for more timely, curated, and sector and regionspecific labourmarket information, alongside improved training and analytic support. Supplementing broader insights from sources like [Job Bank Canada](#) and the [Canadian Occupational Projection System \(COPS\)](#) with realtime jobposting analytics can help meet this need. Platforms such as the [Vicinity Jobs Trends Navigator](#) and [Hiring Demand Reporting System](#) continuously scan and analyze online job postings to identify emerging skills, hiring patterns, and shifts in employer demand. Because they draw on live jobposting activity, they can detect labourmarket changes earlier than traditional datasets, making them especially valuable in fastmoving fields. Participants also pointed to the usefulness of career pathway tools such as [Career Cruising](#) and [OpportuNext](#), which help students connect their skills with labourmarket opportunities. Together, these tools expand the evidence base available to CDPs and strengthen their ability to offer accurate, timely, and actionable guidance in an increasingly dynamic labour market.

Guiding students through an AI-driven landscape

AI is rapidly reshaping the labour market, recruitment practices, and how students explore and prepare for career pathways. Career development professionals consistently identified AI as a top-of-mind issue—one that brings both meaningful opportunities to enhance their work and significant challenges.

Interview participants emphasized that AI tools can improve career development by supporting interview practice, resumé refinement, skills assessment, and labour-market trend analysis. When used intentionally, these tools can extend the reach of career advising, enabling more personalized support and helping students discover emerging roles and pathways.

“Harnessing AI has enormous potential. AI can make navigating complex information easier, faster, and more trustworthy, helping [students] make informed decisions about their careers.”

Career education specialist, university career services

Career development professionals also reported mounting pressure to help students navigate an AI-driven labour market and assess shifting occupational risks and opportunities. Many students enter career planning with limited understanding of how AI is reshaping their disciplines, which skills will be in demand, or how to use AI tools effectively and ethically. CDPs face similar challenges, often without access to structured training or resources that would enable them to provide AI-related guidance with confidence.

Recent research led by Signal49 Research in partnership with the Alberta Machine Intelligence Institute (Amii)⁷ underscores the need for broader, coordinated institutional strategies to equip students with the AI knowledge and skills required for success in today’s labour market—and to ensure educators have the training and tools necessary to integrate AI competencies into teaching and advising.

Without institutionally supported learning on AI fundamentals, workplace applications, and responsible-use practices, students are left without the information they need to make informed career decisions, while CDPs must address these gaps one student at a time—an approach that is neither scalable nor sustainable.



⁷ Signal49 Research, *Preparing an AI-ready workforce: Strategies for Canadian post-secondary leaders*.



Artificial intelligence in teaching and learning – Ontario Tech University

This online certificate equips educators and professionals to integrate AI into educational settings, offering foundational knowledge of AI's role, ethics, and applications, reinforced through hands-on projects and case studies.

Key learning outcomes

- Explore AI-based learning technologies such as chatbots, virtual assistants, and gamification in educational contexts.
- Examine the ethical and social implications of AI in teaching and learning, including data privacy, algorithmic biases, and AI “hallucinations.”
- Understand how AI can support the writing process across stages: generating ideas/content, organizing, composing, and revising documents.
- Investigate the use of AI in simulation-based learning, focusing on simulation fidelity, cost effectiveness, and skills transfer.

More information on this certificate can be found on the program [website](#).



Artificial intelligence for the professional – Humber Polytechnic

This stackable micro-credential helps professionals apply AI in their work through practical tool training, ethical guidance, and real-world applications that strengthen productivity and decision-making.

Key features

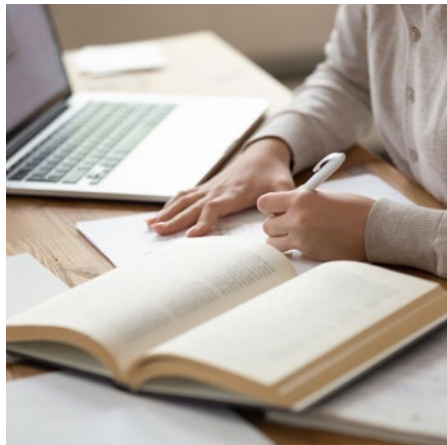
- hands-on learning with AI tools, case studies, and simulations
- skills applicable across fields like finance, HR, operations, marketing, and public administration
- Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) funding eligibility for micro-credentials
- flexible learning with self-paced and scheduled options

More information on Humber's micro-credential can be found on the program [website](#).

Actionable insights to strengthen career services

CDPs are facing intensifying pressures: expanding portfolios, rising student needs, constrained resources, and limited access to coordinated institutional support. These conditions not only undermine their effectiveness, but also contribute to a sense of isolation, with many CDPs feeling they operate on the fringes rather than as fully integrated partners within their institutions.

The following recommendations focus on collaboration, integration, and capacity-building, offering actionable strategies for post-secondary and career services leaders to enhance CDP impact and improve student outcomes within existing funding and resource constraints.



1. Establish a clear, institution-wide framework that acknowledges and clarifies CDPs' expanding responsibilities. Use the Canadian Career Development Foundation's 2021 *National Competency Profile for Career Development Professionals* to delineate clear role boundaries and create formal escalation pathways for specialized supports, including mental health and accessibility services.
2. Develop formal cross-campus coordination structures—such as working groups, joint protocols, or service agreements—to connect career services with mental health services, accessibility offices, Indigenous and international student offices, co-op/WIL offices, and faculties. This collaborative approach reduces duplication of effort, pools resources, and ensures students receive holistic, seamless support across multiple touchpoints.
3. For institutions with limited cross-campus services, form partnerships with local organizations—such as mental health services, accessibility agencies, workforce boards, and Indigenous or cultural groups—to co-develop resources, training, and referral pathways for students with specialized needs. This approach expands student support and equips staff to provide holistic guidance without extensive internal infrastructure.

4. Integrate career services into the student experience early by embedding career content in first-year programs, core courses, and orientation activities. Partner CDPs with faculty and centres for teaching and learning to align coursework with career pathways and experiential learning opportunities, providing students with continuous, actionable guidance and reducing job uncertainty as they progress toward graduation.
5. Establish a cross-unit employer engagement working group – including representatives from career services, co-op/WIL offices, faculties, and alumni/advancement teams – to coordinate employer outreach, career fairs, and other employment initiatives. One of the group’s early deliverables can be to create a centralized, accessible employer relationship inventory (including contacts, opportunities, agreements, and history) to remove relationship gatekeeping, reduce duplication, and expand opportunities for all students, including those not in co-op programs. Developing clear guidelines and agreements can help ensure that inventory contacts are handled thoughtfully and any revenue from career events is distributed fairly among working-group member units.
6. Implement coordinated institutional strategies to equip students and CDPs with AI knowledge and skills. Provide structured training for students on AI literacy, workplace applications, and ethical use, alongside professional development for CDPs, and integrate AI tools into career advising to deliver scalable, personalized, and informed guidance in an AI-driven labour market.
7. Form regional and industry-specific data-sharing networks by partnering with industry, professional associations, research organizations, other post-secondary institutions, and employers to exchange timely, relevant LMI. Leverage existing tools – such as [Job Bank Canada](#), [COPS](#), [Vicinity Jobs Trends Navigator](#) and [Hiring Demand Reporting System](#), [Career Cruising](#), and [OpportuNext](#) – and pool institutional resources to develop or adopt shared digital platforms that provide career advisors with streamlined access to current LMI. Convene regular regional and sector-based industry roundtables to strengthen collaboration and ensure insights remain current. These networks will equip career advisors – particularly those in under-resourced institutions – with real-time, region-specific intelligence to better support students in navigating emerging employment opportunities and evolving skills requirements.



Appendix A

Methodology

Aggregate terms used in this report

Throughout this report, we use the following terms to quantify the percentage of interview participants expressing similar sentiments:

- **some/a few/several:** less than 30 per cent of participants
- **many:** 30–40 per cent of participants
- **almost half:** 41–49 per cent of participants
- **half:** 50 per cent of participants
- **most/majority/over half:** over 50 per cent of participants

About the research

This project was designed to identify challenges, gaps, and opportunities in the supports available to career development professionals (CDPs) working in Canada's post-secondary institutions (PSIs).

Forty CDPs from post-secondary institutions across Canada participated in individual research interviews.

Participant recruitment

Recruitment for this study encompassed CDPs working in post-secondary education across Canada. Institution and geographical targets were set to ensure that:

- participants were evenly distributed among institution types (i.e., colleges, polytechnics, and universities);
- participants' geographical location was aligned with the distribution of post-secondary student enrolments across the country.

We identified potential participants by:

- using publicly available contact information for CDPs working in post-secondary education;
- sharing a call to participate through LinkedIn, partner organizations, Research Advisory Board (RAB) members and their organizations (see Acknowledgements), and non-profit organizations working with CDPs in post-secondary institutions;
- asking members of the research team, RAB, and study participants to recommend or share recruitment materials with their networks.

The research team sought 40 interviews with CDPs working in post-secondary institutions. We sent email invitations to 86 potential interviewees over a three-month period between January and March 2025. The response rate was 47 per cent.

Sample demographics

The interviews were distributed as follows: 26 CDPs from central Canada, 10 from Western Canada, three from Atlantic Canada, and one from the territories, reflecting the number of post-secondary institutions in these regions. The recruitment targeted an equal number of colleges/polytechnics and universities, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1
Interview targets by location and institution type

Institution type	Western Canada	Central Canada	Atlantic Canada	Territories	Total
College/polytechnic	5	13	1	1	20
University	5	13	2	0	20
Total	10	26	3	1	40

Source: Signal49 Research.

Qualitative analysis

The research team conducted virtual interviews with CDPs between January and March 2025. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and transcribed, yielding 381 pages (204,652 words) of text.

Interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Initial coding themes were developed based on the research questions and literature review, followed by an exploratory analysis of preliminary data. Three researchers independently coded the interview transcripts, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus to ensure consistency in interpretation. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, which produced a coefficient of 0.84, indicating strong agreement among coders. Themes were then examined according to both their frequency and the intensity of participants' observations. Due to the small sample size, we cannot generalize beyond these interviews to the wider population of CDPs.

Semi-structured interview questions

We developed the interview guides based on existing literature and in conjunction with the project's Research Advisory Board. Sample interview questions included:

- How long have you been a career professional within a post-secondary institution?
- What is top of mind when it comes to career development services in post-secondary institutions right now?
- What is working well when it comes to supporting students with their job search or making career decisions?
- What kinds of labour market information do you find most important?
- What are your go-to labour-market information resources or tools?
- How easy or difficult is it for you to find useful labour-market information, and what makes you say that?
- Do you feel you have the tools and resources to help support students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., international students, students with disabilities, neurodivergent students, Indigenous students)?
- Can you describe any changes in the labour market that are affecting how you support students?

Appendix B

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