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# Career Development Strategies to Support Neurodivergent Students

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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 The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

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# Why this matters

- Neurodivergent students are enrolling in post-secondary education at increasing rates but remain less likely to graduate and are under-represented in the labour force.
- They face academic, social, and employment barriers that can hinder career readiness, transitions to work, and long-term success.
- Neurodivergent students are a highly diverse group, often navigating multiple diagnoses and intersecting identities that shape their experiences and needs.
- Career advisors are uniquely positioned to help neurodivergent students overcome barriers, build confidence, and explore career pathways that are aligned with their strengths and goals.



# Recommendations for supporting neurodivergent students

## 1. Commit to ongoing learning about neurodiversity

Career advisors play a key role in facilitating equitable opportunities for neurodivergent students. This requires a continuous commitment to learning, staying current with evolving knowledge and language around neurodiversity. By doing so, advisors can ensure that their support for students remains informed, inclusive, and effective.

- Integrate continuous learning into your daily practice by staying up to date with current research and neurodivergent perspectives on inclusive approaches, and by participating in ongoing training. Reflect on assumptions, share insights with colleagues, and model curiosity and openness. This ongoing learning ensures advising remains inclusive, informed, and responsive to students' needs.

## 2. Navigate disclosure

Many neurodivergent students may choose not to disclose their diagnosis/identity at school or work due to concerns about discrimination, limited trust in institutional processes, or challenges accessing formal documentation.

- Understand that disclosure is not always possible or preferred. Help students thoughtfully assess the potential benefits and risks of disclosure in workplace settings and support them in developing clear, strengths-based language to communicate their needs and working preferences to employers.

### 3. Recognize and respond to career anxiety

A substantial number of neurodivergent students also experience mental health challenges and increased sensitivity to rejection, which can intensify feelings of uncertainty around their skills, career fit, and future employability. This often leads to heightened stress and diminished confidence during career planning and transitions.

- Help students build self-efficacy with strengths-based advising, low-pressure career exploration, and collaboration with mental health services. Facilitating access to peer support groups, neurodiversity networks, and alumni mentorship can further promote belonging, reduce isolation, and reinforce students' belief in their professional potential.

### 4. Expand awareness of diverse employment pathways

Traditional employment models don't always reflect the full spectrum of neurodivergent strengths. Many students thrive in environments that offer greater autonomy, flexibility, and creativity—qualities often found in non-traditional career paths like entrepreneurship, freelancing, and project-based work.

- Help students analyze job descriptions to identify roles that align with their specific and sustained interests, fostering longer-term motivation. Connect students with resources such as start-up accelerators, incubators, freelance platforms, mentorship programs, and social-entrepreneurship networks to translate those interests into meaningful and accessible career opportunities.

### 5. Promote neuroinclusive work-integrated learning (WIL)

Neurodivergent students remain under-represented in WIL programs due to systemic barriers and limited employer awareness about effective support strategies. These students may also need extra guidance to navigate workplace expectations and communicate their needs.

- Advancing neuroinclusive WIL involves preparing both students and employers for success. Foster career experimentation by helping design short-term or flexible work experiences that align employer needs with student strengths. Partner with employers before placements to provide neurodiversity training, offer tailored resources, and establish regular site visits or online check-ins to sustain support and learning throughout the experience.



## 6. Bridge service silos

Career services are often siloed from accessibility, mental health, and other student services, resulting in fragmented assistance for neurodivergent students.

- Develop coordinated, cross-departmental collaboration, which is key to building integrated support systems. Establish wraparound service models that bring together career, accessibility, and wellness supports to reduce the burden on students, promote continuity of care, and foster a more inclusive and responsive learning environment.

## 7. Support executive-functioning needs

Challenges with executive functioning, such as time management, organization, prioritization, motivation, and follow-through, are common for neurodivergent individuals and can impact academic success and career readiness.

- Offer students connections to academic support, accessibility, or wellness services for coaching, tools, and workshops that strengthen executive functioning. Targeted referrals based on an initial needs assessment can help build skills and confidence.



### Summary of what works

- **Coordinate support** across career, accessibility, and mental health services
- **Prepare employers** with neurodiversity training and inclusive practices
- **Foster community** through peer mentorship and neurodiversity networks
- **Connect students with executive-functioning support** and practical skill-building resources
- **Highlight alternative career paths**, like freelancing and entrepreneurship

# Further reading

This resource is informed by our previous research that examined the experiences of neurodivergent Canadians in education and employment and explored the advancement of neuroinclusive policies for learning and work.

- *Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive.* The Conference Board of Canada, 2022.
- *Breaking Down Barriers: Improving the Workplace Experience for Neurodivergent Canadians.* The Conference Board of Canada, 2023.
- *Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education.* The Conference Board of Canada, 2024.
- *Creating Inclusive Campuses: Neuroinclusive Policies and Practices in Post-Secondary Education.* The Conference Board of Canada, 2025.

See also:

- *Thinking Differently at Work: A Guide for Neurodivergent Employees.* Association of Canadian Financial Officers (ACFO-ACAF), 2025.



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## **Career Development Strategies to Support Neurodivergent Students**

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