



The Future Skills Podcast

Season 4: Mini Episode

Neurodivergent student experiences in post-secondary education

In this mini episode of the *Future Skills Podcast*, Jeremy Strachan speaks with Dr. Jennifer Fane, Lead Research Associate at the Conference Board of Canada, about her recent study on neurodiversity in Canadian post-secondary education. The research, conducted in partnership with the Future Skills Centre, explores key findings from the report *Creating Inclusive Campuses: Neuroinclusive Policies and Practices in Post-secondary Education*.

The discussion highlights the challenges neurodivergent students face, including their invisibility on campuses, complex accommodation processes, and persistent stigma. Dr. Fane calls for greater accessibility within equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) frameworks and offers practical recommendations, such as establishing neurodiversity hubs and providing campus-wide neurodiversity training.

The episode also previews upcoming Future Skills Centre research on inclusive employment pathways for neurodivergent individuals.

Guests

Dr. Jennifer Fane, Lead Research Associate,
Conference Board of Canada

Host

Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate,
Conference Board of Canada

Links

Future Skills Centre and Conference Board of Canada links, such as recommended articles and webpages, social media handles, etc.

Future Skills Centre Homepage:

<https://fsc-ccf.ca/>

Future Skills Centre Twitter:

https://twitter.com/fsc_ccf_en

The Conference Board of Canada Homepage:

<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/>

The Conference Board of Canada Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/ConfBoardofCda>

The Conference Board of Canada Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/ConferenceBoardofCanada/>

Creating Inclusive Campuses: Neuroinclusive Policies and Practices in Post-Secondary Education

[English](#) | [French](#)

Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education

[English](#) | [French](#)

Breaking Down Barriers: Improving the Workplace Experience of Neurodivergent Canadians

[English](#) | [French](#)

Transcript

Jeremy Strachan:

Welcome to the Future Skills Podcast, where we spotlight the important issues shaping the changing landscape of working and learning in Canada. I'm your host Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate at the Conference Board of Canada. For this mini episode, we're joined by Dr. Jennifer Fane, a Lead Research Associate and my colleague at the Conference Board, to discuss her recent work conducted in partnership with the Future Skills Centre on neurodiversity and post-secondary education in Canada.

Building on the impact of the Conference Board's previous research on inclusion and workforce development, which you can find links to in the show notes, Dr. Fane has been exploring how Canadian post-secondary institutions can better support neurodivergent learners, including those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other neuro minorities. However, systemic barriers remain, particularly in creating accessible learning environments that align with labour force demands. Dr. Fane is going to share insights on what post-secondary institutions can do to bridge these gaps, ensuring neurodivergent students receive the tools and opportunities they need to thrive. As Canada works to tackle labour shortages and unlock the full potential of its workforce, this work is more timely and essential than ever.

Jennifer, it's so great to talk to you. First of all, congratulations on this research. I just finished reading the new report you've released called *Creating Inclusive Campuses, Neuroinclusive Policies and Practices in Post-secondary Education*. I'm thrilled to have you here on the podcast today to ask you a few questions about this important work.

Jennifer Fane:

Thanks, Jeremy. I'm really excited to join.

Jeremy:

All right, let's jump in. So, can you walk us through the report? Can you tell us what some of the main findings are from it?

Jennifer:

One of the biggest findings was that the neurodivergent student population in Canadian post-secondary education is largely invisible. And what I mean by that is that less than half of neurodivergent students are disclosing to their institution that they are neurodivergent and possibly have additional accommodation needs or learning needs that are not currently being met or addressed for them.

The reason why so many students are not disclosing, why over half the population of that is not disclosing, is an interesting question that many might have when reading this report. And this is twofold. Another key finding that came from the study, one that the accommodation processes in post-secondary can be quite challenging for students to navigate, and also require extensive documentation that can be quite challenging for neurodivergent students to access.

But another and possibly even a greater challenge is the stigma that neurodivergent students face in post-secondary. Neurodivergent students have been historically excluded from post-secondary education through a lack of accessible pathways through the K to 12 system. As K to 12 education has become more inclusive, we see more and more neurodivergent students moving into the post-secondary education sector, which is fantastic.

However, because the sector has been created and sustained in not necessarily highly inclusive ways, learners who learn differently or who have different learning needs can be quite stigmatized and [it] can be quite challenging for them to be able to receive the accommodations or support that they need or really even just the understanding and empathy of their learning, learning needs, communication needs, and social needs as well in post-secondary. And those key findings really set the stage for us in this research to explore what would make a difference when it comes to meaningful inclusion of neurodivergent students within post-secondary education.

Jeremy:

So let's take a second to unpack the importance of the data set of neurodivergent learners that you collected as part of this research. I understand it's the first of its kind, and I'm hoping you might be able to speak more on that.

Jennifer:

Yeah, thank you. And that's really where the sort of the genesis of this research study came from, is that we really just did not know what the profile of neurodivergent student population looks like across Canada.

There has been research in this area in the Canadian context, but the studies tended to be either quite a small sample size, perhaps maybe in one institution, or maybe a couple colleges, or they might have looked at one subset of the neurodivergent population, so maybe just autistic learners or students with learning disabilities.

So, the idea behind it is that if we really want to understand this population, we actually need some sort of representative population-based data, which is what we've attempted to do with this study. We now have a data set of 400 neurodivergent students across colleges, universities, and polytechnics across Canada.

And what that's done is allowed us to sort of drill in and look at some key characteristics of the population. So, with better understanding of the population and some of those needs, it really helps post-secondary institutions to think about what types of supports, the delivery of those supports, and communicating those supports out to students, what that could look like.

That data set is also what has allowed us to understand the levels of disclosure, challenges within the accommodation process, and as well as other challenges that the student population might be encountering in terms of stigma or barriers.

Jeremy:

Thanks for that. I want to jump on that, just maybe pivot towards the topic of accessibility.

One of the things in the report you mentioned is, where is the A in the EDI framework of inclusion? And so I'm wondering if you could speak to some of the challenges that neurodivergent students are facing on their post-secondary journeys when it comes to accessibility.

Jennifer:

Post-secondary institutions right now, like many organizations, are really focused on EDI and trying to enhance the equity, diversity, and inclusion of organizations. But accessibility often really falls by the wayside, despite that an institution being accessible is essential for inclusion. And some of this comes from how post-secondary has been set up, in that accessibility services is based on that medical model of disability.

So, a student comes in with extensive documentation based on assessments, which are quite challenging for students to access sometimes. And if they meet that threshold for disability, then they are required to be accommodated. So that accessibility is really based on that medical model of "this diagnosis prefers this level of accommodation."

And that system has been working more or less and certainly is allowing a lot of students to access accommodations; not just neurodivergent students, but students with disabilities and more broadly. However, within the neurodiversity framework, where we're looking at neurodiversity from a social model, thinking of differences as beneficial to the human existence and how all neurotypes should be valid and supported, that medical model of disability and accessibility doesn't really fit with really thinking about inclusion in a broad sense.

One of the key findings from this research was about the need to centre accessibility within EDI frameworks so that the accessibility of education for neurodivergent students, and staff as well actually, for all neurodivergent individuals, is really a focus, which means that there would be priorities, there would be measurement or assessment of how the

institution is doing in terms of accessibility, and there would be opportunities for consultation and feedback from students, staff employees, who are neurodivergent in order to really identify priority areas for that institution to enhance accessibility.

Jeremy:

Thanks. That kind of leads me into the next question I have. And the last question I'm going to ask you about the report, and that's more about the recommendations that you're offering here to address some of these inclusion and accessibility needs. You've already mentioned a few, but I'm wondering if you could maybe give us some ideas, what you found, what you're recommending for post-secondary institutions to provide better learning experiences.

Jennifer:

One of the big findings here is just that it is really challenging for neurodivergent students to navigate the multiple layers of disclosure, accommodations, documentation, all those processes alongside their learning, their courses, their assignments, exams.

And for many students, and the majority of students in post-secondary, they are school leavers or young adults. So that's the population between 18 to 24. These are young adults who might be living alone for the first time. They might be aging out of pediatric care and having large disruptions in their mental health supports or medical supports.

They might also be living alone for the first time and really having to do a lot of that, the day-to-day work of adults that they might be new to. And then you layer on that they also likely have executive function challenges, so, organization, planning, attention, motivation, and you're asking that population of students, the ones who are possibly coming up the most challenges to do the most work to ensure that they have their accommodation. So, they're the ones having to fill out all the forms, access funding, talk to multiple stakeholders within the university to try and get their accommodation needs met. The load on neurodivergent

students is actually much higher than on neurotypical students, even though we know that it is the most difficult for this population.

So that is really the key to figuring out how to make post-secondary more inclusive, is really to figure out how do we make it more navigable for neurodivergent students. So, some ways of doing that would be to create a hub, a neurodiversity hub. Some institutions have done this where they've co-located services such as student services, mental health and being, accessibility services, students rights, office of students' rights, student responsibilities.

When we co-locate these services, we make it a lot easier for students to navigate and manage. It also de-stigmatizes accessibility services when it's right next to student well-being and student services as well. It's just a suite of services that students can take advantage of.

Some other key priorities for addressing this would be campus-wide neurodiversity training tailored to different employee groups. That would include faculty, who are the ones who are required to implement or allow student accommodations within classrooms and exam settings.

That is a big barrier for a neurodivergent student. Imagine having an accommodation for learning and you have to explain it to eight different instructors or faculty or professors every single year across four to five years, and then getting different reactions and different levels of support and sometimes frankly inappropriate responses from faculty around their accommodation needs.

So, the better we can train all employee groups—so that would be staff as well. It's also security and food service workers, everyone who is working on campus, engaging with neurodivergent students really needs to have a better understanding of neurodiversity and how to appropriately support and respond to neurodivergent students, whether that's in a classroom, a dorm, or in crisis, if that's where they are and what is happening.

Jeremy:

Congratulations again. This is important work. One final question for you. What's on the horizon? What are the next steps in this research?

Jennifer:

Thanks, Jeremy. I'm really pleased to share that the Future Skills Centre continues to commit to advancing neurodiversity research and knowledge in this area. The first foray was looking at neuroinclusive workplaces and then here in post-secondary and really thinking about how to advance meaningful inclusion for neurodivergent individuals.

I am excited to announce that there will be a new neurodiversity research study launching in 2025, thanks to the Future Skills Centre, where we'll be exploring inclusive pathways to employment for neurodivergent individuals.

Jeremy:

Amazing. Jennifer, thanks so much for speaking with me today. It's been great talking to you about all of this work.

Jennifer:

You're so welcome, Jeremy. Thanks for having me.

Jeremy:

This work is free to access in French and English. All you need to do is log in or create an account.

Thanks again for joining for this bonus mini episode of the Future Skills Podcast. Thanks to my guest, Dr. Jennifer Fane, Lead Research Associate at The Conference Board of Canada. You can hear all four seasons of the Future Skills Podcast on your favorite podcast app. Give us a follow if you haven't already, and stay tuned for the next season.

This episode was produced, edited, and hosted by me, Jeremy Strachan. Sound design also by yours truly. Thanks for listening.

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Blueprint

The responsibility for the findings and conclusions of this research rests entirely with The Conference Board of Canada.