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Fostering Neurodivergent Talent

Participation, Barriers, and Experiences in Work-Integrated Learning

ISSUE BRIEFING | October 14, 2026

Future Skills Centre | Centre des Compétences futures

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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Key findings

- Interest in work-integrated learning (WIL) is high among neurodivergent students. Forty-one per cent of students currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution stated that they intend to complete WIL, while 24 per cent had already completed a WIL experience.
- Career-related outcomes are a key driver of WIL participation among neurodivergent students. Among those planning to participate, 61 per cent cited gaining relevant field experience, 48 per cent improving job prospects, 46 per cent indicated that WIL was a required component of their chosen program, and 38 per cent cited exploring career interests.
- Awareness and perceived value are key barriers to WIL participation. Among students who do not plan to participate, nearly half (48 per cent) reported not being aware of WIL opportunities, while 32 per cent did not see a benefit to participation.
- Most neurodivergent students navigate WIL with limited institutional encouragement or confidence in available supports. Just 23 per cent of students planning to participate in WIL reported being encouraged by faculty, advisors, or their institution, while only 10 per cent were confident their accommodation or support needs could be met.
- Disclosure rates are substantially lower in workplace settings than at post-secondary institutions. While 44 per cent of neurodivergent students reported disclosing a neurodivergent identity to their institution, only 28 per cent disclosed to employers during a WIL placement, suggesting that perceived risks or limited benefits may discourage workplace disclosure.
- Workplace culture and integration challenges can limit students' WIL experiences. Neurodivergent students reported barriers related to stigma and discrimination, inflexible workplace norms, social expectations, and communication with supervisors and co-workers. Open-ended responses further highlight challenges interpreting unspoken workplace expectations, understanding social cues, and knowing when and how to contribute.

Designing WIL to unlock neurodivergent talent

Work-integrated learning (WIL) can play a critical role in bridging post-secondary education (PSE) and employment. For neurodivergent learners, this potential is strongest when pathways into WIL are clearly communicated, intentionally structured, and supported in ways that are consistent across both academic and workplace settings.

Many WIL models continue to rely on a single, “standard” pathway that assumes students will proactively identify, navigate, and secure opportunities. When WIL is not explicitly embedded within programs, clearly communicated, and supported through coordinated practices that are inclusive of neurodivergent needs, neurodivergent students may face additional barriers to participating in and benefiting from these opportunities. As a result, they may miss opportunities to support their academic success, career development, and transition into the workforce.

Drawing on survey data from 407 neurodivergent post-secondary students and recent graduates across Canada, this briefing explores patterns of participation in WIL. We delve into the motivations, barriers, disclosure decisions, and placement experiences that influence both access and outcomes for these students.

By centring the experiences of neurodivergent learners, this briefing identifies practical actions that post-secondary institutions can take to strengthen WIL design, expand access, improve the consistency of supports, and create more inclusive pathways into experiential learning. Ultimately, these efforts can help neurodivergent students to participate fully in WIL, develop their skills and confidence, and achieve stronger employment outcomes.







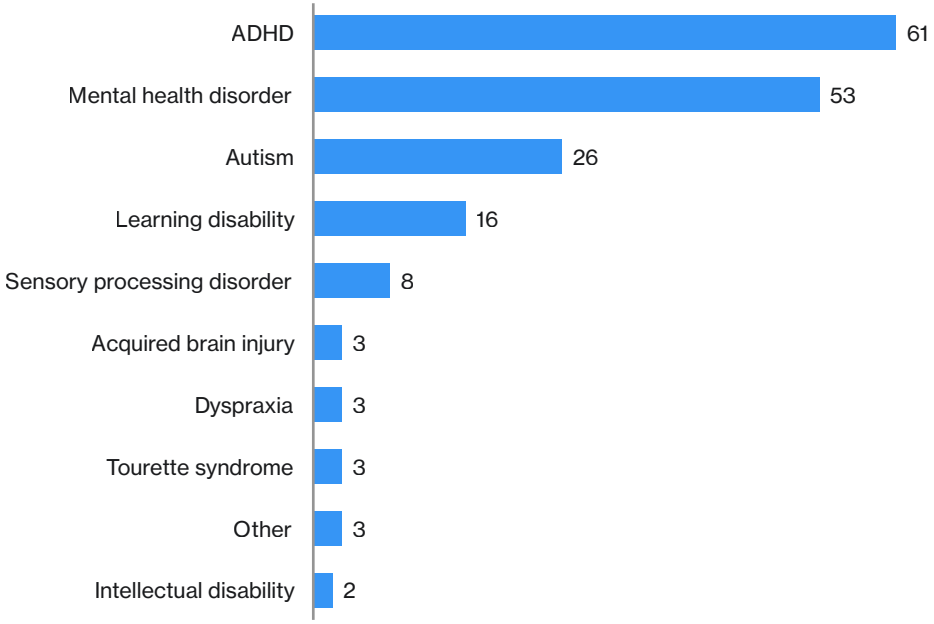
What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in how people think, learn, process information, and interact with the world. Within this framework, individuals whose cognitive functioning differs from dominant norms are described as *neurodivergent*. This encompasses a wide range of identities and experiences, including autism, ADHD, mental health conditions, learning disabilities, and individuals with intersecting neurodivergent identities.

Signal49 Research has built a growing body of work examining how neurodivergent individuals navigate education and employment systems in Canada. This research consistently shows that outcomes are shaped both by individual traits and by how systems are designed—particularly in relation to access and how opportunities are communicated, structured, and supported.

In this study, neurodivergent students report a diverse range of identities, with more than half identifying with more than one condition. This diversity highlights the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to learning and work experiences. (See Chart 1.)

Chart 1
ADHD is the most commonly reported neurodivergent identity
Q: Which of the following neurodivergent identities or diagnoses are applicable to you? (n = 407)
(per cent)



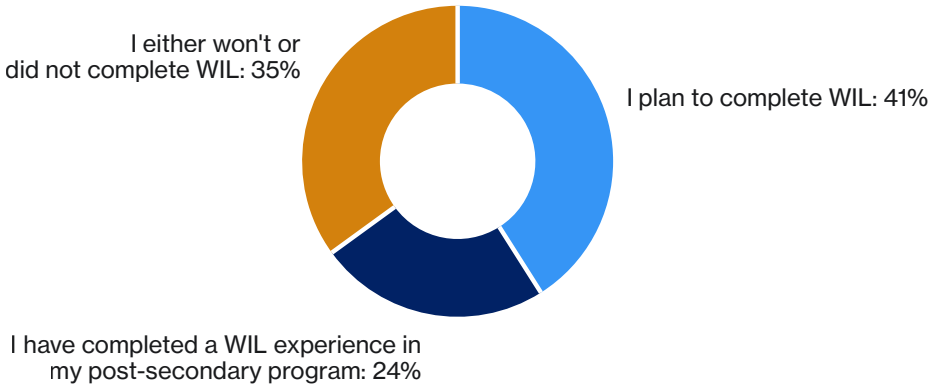
Note: "Other" includes diagnoses or identities not listed and specified by respondents.
Source: Signal49 Research.

Interest in WIL strong, but completion rates low

Among students currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution, most report either having completed a WIL experience (24 per cent) or that they intend to participate in WIL (41 per cent) during their studies. Together, nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of students indicate current or planned engagement with WIL, while 35 per cent report that they do not plan to participate. (See Chart 2.) Participation rates did not meaningfully vary by neurodivergent identity.

While many neurodivergent students intend to participate in WIL, completion rates among neurodivergent graduates remain below those observed in the broader graduate population. Among graduates in our sample, 36 per cent reported having completed a WIL experience during their post-secondary education, compared with 46 per cent of Canadian graduates in 2020, as reported by Statistics Canada.[1] This gap raises important questions about the factors that encourage participation, limit access, and shape students' experiences throughout WIL.

Chart 2
Most neurodivergent students are interested in WIL
Q: Which response best describes your experience with WIL?
(per cent)



Note: Data from subset of respondents currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution.
Source: Signal49 Research.

1 Statistics Canada, "Work-integrated learning participation during postsecondary studies, by province of study." Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Last modified May 2, 2025. https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/17c0f64e-cfdd-4b58-9ef3-1c94df99b8e3.

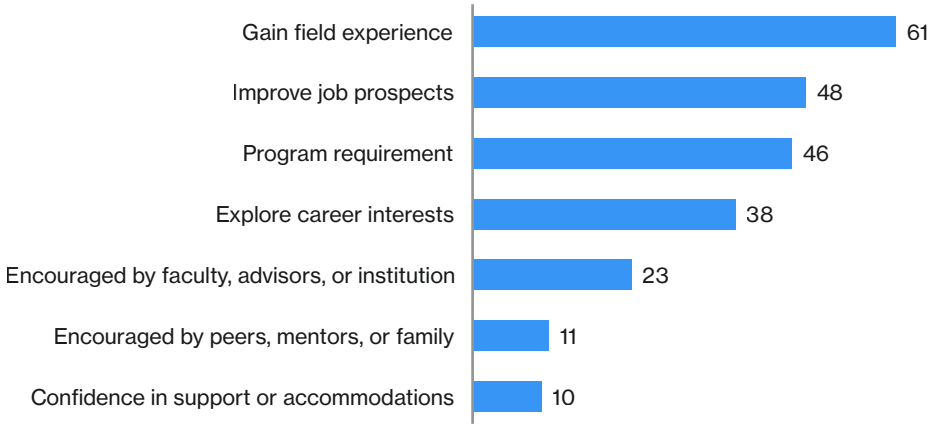
Practical outcomes drive WIL participation

Career-related outcomes are the primary motivators for neurodivergent students considering WIL participation. (See Chart 3.) Neurodivergent students are primarily motivated to participate in WIL by career-related outcomes. Among those planning to participate, the most commonly cited reasons were gaining relevant field experience (61 per cent), improving job prospects (48 per cent), WIL being a required component of their program (46 per cent), and exploring career interests (38 per cent).

In contrast, relatively few students point to institutional encouragement or confidence in available supports as factors influencing their decision to participate. Just 23 per cent of prospective WIL participants report being encouraged by faculty, advisors, or their institution, while only 10 per cent are confident that their accommodation or support needs could be met. A similar pattern was observed for those who had already completed a WIL program.

Whether WIL is a required component of a student's program appears to influence participation. Forty-six per cent of neurodivergent students who intend to complete WIL, and 71 per cent of those who have already completed WIL, cited program-mandated WIL as a reason for participating. Nationally, 84 per cent of graduates who completed a WIL experience reported that WIL was mandatory in their program.[2]

Chart 3
Accessing relevant work experience is the primary WIL motivator
Q: What are the main reasons you are planning to participate in work-integrated learning? Check all that apply. (n = 150)
(per cent)



Note: Data from subset of respondents who indicated they plan to complete WIL.
Source: Signal49 Research.

2 Statistics Canada, "Work-integrated learning participation during postsecondary studies, by province of study."

In their own words: Drivers of WIL participation

"To gain work and job search and interview experience."

"For more experience in my field and to build my network/connections."

"I am pursuing a degree in psychology, and I hope a co-op experience will help me decide on future careers and help my career prospects."

"I learn better by working and being shown and told exactly how to do things (direct clear instructions/communication). I don't like the idea of being just thrown into [a workplace] even if I have the appropriate education and qualifications."

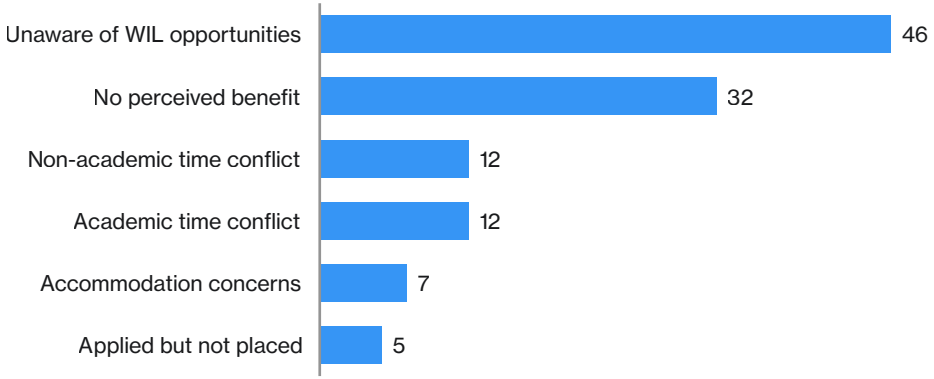
"To get a sense of what the professional environment is actually like—something that classroom learning does not provide."



Low awareness and perceived value limit participation

Among respondents who did not participate in a WIL experience, the most commonly reported barriers were a lack of awareness of WIL opportunities (46 per cent) and no perceived benefit to participation (32 per cent). (See Chart 4.)

Chart 4
Lack of awareness is the top barrier to accessing WIL
Q: Why did you not participate in work-integrated learning? Check all that apply. (n = 148)
(per cent)



Note: Data from subsample of respondents who indicated they won't or did not complete WIL.
Source: Signal49 Research.

These findings suggest that both awareness of WIL opportunities and understanding of their potential benefits remain important barriers to participation among some neurodivergent students. Lower levels of encouragement from faculty and staff may further influence how students learn about and engage with available opportunities.

Qualitative student responses indicate that some participants were uncertain about the range of WIL opportunities available, how these experiences could support their learning and career goals, and how to access or express interest in available opportunities.

In their own words: Why neurodivergent students miss WIL opportunities

"At the time, I didn't think it would be useful for my learning."

"I knew that opportunities existed, but not how to sign up."

"Genuinely, I did not know about them until after the application date in first year, and I did not want to feel behind if I applied in my second year."

"I didn't think it was an option for my program, outside of applying to be a teaching assistant. And I was never good enough at a course to do something like that, so I never looked into it."

Where WIL experiences fall short

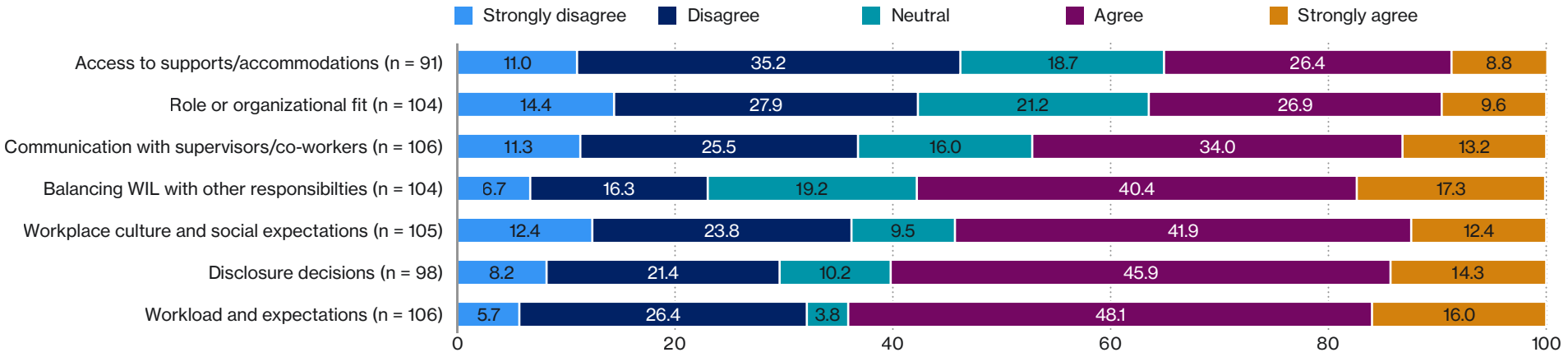
Challenges during WIL were common among neurodivergent students. (See Chart 5.) Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) reported difficulties related to workload demands and expectations, making it the most frequently cited challenge. Six in ten (60 per cent) reported challenges related to disclosure decisions, while 58 per cent experienced difficulties balancing WIL placements with academic, employment, and personal responsibilities.

Workplace integration challenges were also common. More than half of students (54 per cent) reported difficulties navigating workplace culture and social expectations, while nearly half (47 per cent) experienced challenges communicating with supervisors and co-workers.

Together, these results underscore the importance of clearer expectations, better-aligned workloads, and more inclusive workplace practices that support diverse communication styles and reduce barriers to disclosure.

Open-ended responses reinforce these findings, highlighting uncertainty about when and how to contribute, difficulty interpreting implicit norms and social cues, and discomfort engaging in workplace interactions.

Chart 5
WIL challenges are concentrated in workload, balance, and workplace integration
Q: Did you experience any challenges during your WIL experience? (n = 109)
(per cent)



Note: Data from subsample of respondents who completed WIL. Responses for 'not applicable' recoded as missing.
Source: Signal49 Research.

In their own words: Neurodivergent student experiences completing WIL

"I experienced challenges with overstimulation within my rotation placements and struggled to find time and space to de-stress."

"My instructor wanted to send me home because I had a 'flat affect.' I felt forced to disclose the fact I'm autistic, and she later questioned my ability to have empathy for patients in formal school papers."

"As a person with combined type ADHD, it was hard to process all the information that we're provided within a short notice. Also, the fact I experience brain fog makes it hard to communicate information as promptly or even to carry out tasks."

"Switching from a very structured schedule for school to a very unstructured and loose schedule was very difficult, particularly when oversight was not consistent and self-guidance was expected for much of the co-op."

Many students choose not to disclose during WIL

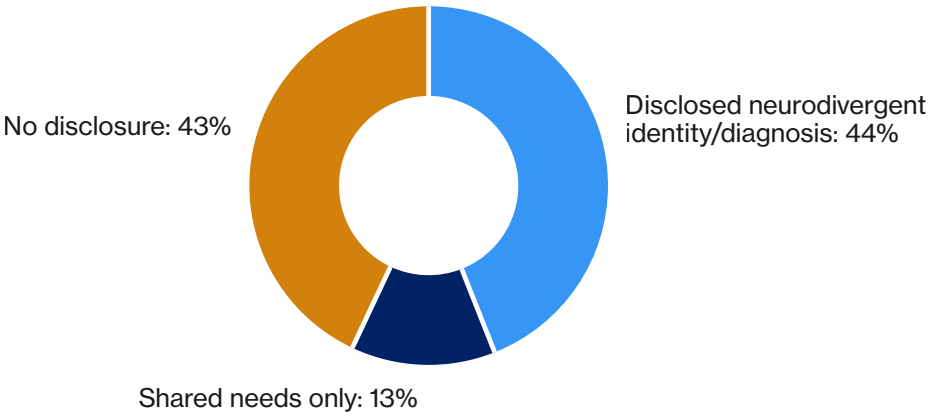
As highlighted above, disclosure is a complex and often difficult aspect of navigating WIL. Students' disclosure patterns suggest that many carefully consider when, where, and how much information to share. While 44 per cent of students chose to disclose their neurodivergent identity or diagnosis to their post-secondary institution during WIL, 43 per cent did not disclose either. An additional 13 per cent chose to share only support needs without disclosing a diagnosis. (See Chart 6.)

Chart 6

Less than half of students disclose to post-secondary institutions during WIL

Q: What best describes your disclosure status during your WIL experience with your school? (n = 109)

(per cent)

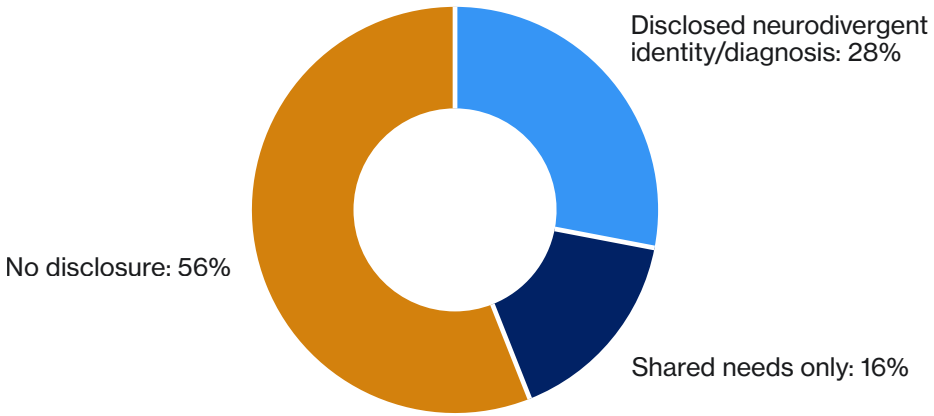


Note: Data from subsample of respondents who completed WIL.
Source: Signal49 Research.

Disclosure was less common in workplace settings. Just 28 per cent of students disclosed their neurodivergent identity or diagnosis to their employer or placement provider, while 16 per cent shared their needs without disclosing a diagnosis. Most students (56 per cent) did not disclose anything to their employer during their placement. (See Chart 7.)

The contrast between disclosure rates to institutions and to employers suggests that students approach disclosure differently depending on the setting. While non-disclosure is common across both contexts, it is particularly prevalent in workplace environments.

Chart 7
Most students do not disclose neurodivergent identity to employers during WIL
Q: What best describes your disclosure status during your WIL experience with your employer/placement provider? (n = 109)
(per cent)



Note: Data from subsample of respondents who completed WIL.
Source: Signal49 Research

This pattern may reflect differences in the perceived risks and benefits of disclosure. Post-secondary institutions typically have established accommodation processes and support services, whereas workplace settings may be perceived as involving greater uncertainty, concerns about stigma, impacts on performance evaluations, or potential effects on future employment opportunities. As a result, many neurodivergent students may choose to navigate WIL placements without disclosing their identity or support needs, despite the potential benefits of workplace accommodations and other forms of support.

In their own words: Navigating disclosure during WIL

"I try my best to hide [my neurodivergence]; I do not want to be undervalued because of it."

"I found it hard to express my difficulties and ask for help or accommodations, as I worried that doing so would cause conflict or affect my preceptor's perception of me."

"Not having a diagnosis or feeling comfortable enough to disclose my neurodivergence means that others do not take this aspect of my reality into account. This makes it difficult for me to manage social and academic expectations."

"I did have a hard time deciding whether to disclose to my employer or not. [My neurodivergence] typically does not impact me much at work when the job keeps me busy the whole shift so I decided not to."

Improving WIL access, navigation, and support

Taken together, these findings point to gaps in how WIL is accessed, navigated, and supported. Participation is lower for neurodivergent students than in the broader student population. Barriers emerge before placements begin, and inflexible workplace norms can create challenges that easily compound within them. These patterns highlight where WIL systems can be strengthened to better connect more students to opportunity.

Three areas stand out:

- **Access:** Not all students can easily find or secure WIL opportunities. Barriers are especially likely to arise in systems with limited placement availability, highly competitive selection processes, requirements for students to source their own placements, and/or inflexible entry and participation models. These approaches can disproportionately exclude neurodivergent students who may benefit from structured pathways, transparent criteria, and supported entry points. Expanding access requires increasing the range and types of placements available, embedding WIL more consistently across programs, and reducing reliance on self-directed or competitive processes that assume high levels of prior knowledge, confidence, networks, and normative social skills.
- **Preparedness and navigation:** Expectations, roles, and processes are often unclear, making it harder for students to find, prepare for, and succeed in placements. Non-participation is associated with limited access to information and a lack of clarity regarding the value of WIL for neurodivergent students. Communication about WIL opportunities, benefits, and available supports within post-secondary institutions is not always consistent, timely, or explicit. This includes how information is shared about how WIL works, what students can expect, how to apply, and how experiences connect to career pathways.
- **Support:** Access to accommodations and effective support is inconsistent and often contingent on disclosure, which many students are hesitant to do, particularly in workplace settings. This creates uneven experiences, where some students receive tailored support while others navigate challenges without it. Strengthening support requires moving beyond disclosure-dependent models by embedding flexible, proactive supports into standard WIL design. This includes setting clear expectations with employers, equipping supervisors with practical strategies for supporting diverse cognitive and work styles, and ensuring continuity of support across institutional and workplace environments so students do not have to re-initiate or renegotiate supports in each setting.

Actionable recommendations for post-secondary leaders

Post-secondary institutions have an important role to play in addressing these barriers. The recommendations that follow are organized around the three areas identified in this research—improving access to opportunities, strengthening student preparedness and navigation, and embedding supports that enable neurodivergent students to successfully participate in and benefit from WIL experiences.

Improving access to WIL

- Increase and diversify WIL opportunities. Expand the number and types of WIL experiences available to broaden student access and reduce reliance on limited, highly competitive, or self-sourced placements. While financial and staffing constraints may limit institutions' ability to increase traditional placement opportunities, scalable options such as curricular, project-based, on-campus, part-time, entrepreneurial, and virtual experiences can help expand WIL capacity.
- Make pathways into WIL visible and easy to navigate. Partner with Accessibility Services and other student support units to provide clear, consistent information about opportunities, requirements, timelines, accommodations, and supports. Deliver information through accessible, well-coordinated channels at key points in students' academic journeys to reduce information overload while ensuring students can access the guidance they need.
- Connect WIL opportunities to student success. Help students understand how different WIL experiences contribute to academic achievement, career exploration, skill development, and employment outcomes. Share examples that reflect the diversity of student experiences, including those of neurodivergent students, so students can better see how WIL may align with their own goals, strengths, and circumstances. This could include student stories, career pathway examples, and outcomes data shared through orientation programming, information sessions, advising supports, and social media.
- Assess and strengthen WIL integration across programs. Conduct regular program-level audits to map WIL opportunities, identify gaps in participation and access, and inform curriculum redesign, program improvement, and the expansion of experiential learning pathways. As part of regular program review processes, WIL audits can provide a systematic mechanism for assessing and strengthening WIL integration across programs.

Increasing student preparation and navigation support

- Build student readiness for WIL throughout the student journey. Prepare students for WIL early and often by embedding career readiness, workplace competencies, and experiential learning preparation into orientation, advising, and core courses. This can help students build the confidence, skills, and knowledge needed to engage successfully in WIL opportunities. Recognizing the resource pressures facing many institutions, efforts could focus on strengthening and coordinating existing practices rather than introducing new services or stand-alone initiatives.
- Provide information in multiple formats. Offer guidance through workshops, check lists, online resources, and advisory appointments (virtual and in person) to support different learning, communication, and information-processing preferences to prepare students for workplace success.
- Prepare students to navigate diverse workplace environments. Provide structured pre-placement preparation that equips students to understand and adapt to different role expectations, onboarding processes, professional norms, and workplace cultures, including situations where expectations may be unclear or evolve over time.
- Provide consistent guidance during key transition points. Post-secondary institutions should consider how students can access support before and during placements to build confidence, problem-solving skills, and successful workplace integration. Neurodivergent students may particularly benefit from predictable opportunities to ask questions, clarify expectations, and address challenges as they arise during the transition into and through a WIL experience. Examples may include check-ins before placements begin, during onboarding, and at key points throughout the placement experience.
- Connect students with lived-experience perspectives. Engage neurodivergent alumni and recent graduates in WIL preparation activities, mentoring opportunities, guest speaking, and career panels. Their experiences can help students build confidence, better understand workplace expectations, and learn practical strategies for navigating WIL and early career transitions.





Working to build supports that are easily available and accessed

- Foster neuroinclusive WIL cultures. Promote shared understanding of neurodiversity across post-secondary institutions and employer partners by encouraging practices that value diverse ways of learning, communicating, and working.
- Embed support into standard WIL practice. Incorporate flexible approaches such as clear communication norms, structured supervision, multiple ways of demonstrating competence, and predictable workflows so students can access support without needing to formally disclose.
- Establish accessible pathways for feedback and assistance. Ensure students know how to raise concerns, request support, and provide feedback throughout placements, with clear escalation processes and timely responses when issues arise.
- Equip faculty, WIL staff, and employers with practical tools. Provide training and resources on supporting diverse communication styles, work preferences, and learning needs, and establish shared expectations for inclusive supervision across institutional and workplace settings. This could include adopting “ways of working” documents that help students and supervisors collaboratively explore communication preferences, workplace expectations, and effective support strategies.
- Monitor student experiences and outcomes. Establish mechanisms to regularly collect student feedback and participation data, using the results to assess the effectiveness of WIL programs, identify unmet needs, and guide ongoing improvements to accessibility, support, and program design.



Appendix A

Methodology

About the research

We examine how neurodivergent students and recent graduates in Canada access, navigate, and experience work-integrated learning (WIL) as part of their post-secondary education. We ask the following research questions:

1. To what extent do neurodivergent students participate in WIL, and how does participation vary across learner groups?
2. What motivates neurodivergent students to pursue WIL opportunities?
3. What barriers prevent or discourage neurodivergent students from participating in WIL?
4. How do neurodivergent students navigate disclosure, accommodations, and support during WIL experiences?
5. What actions can post-secondary institutions take to improve access, navigation, and support, for neurodivergent students in WIL?

To find out, we surveyed 407 neurodivergent students and recent graduates across Canada, including current post-secondary students, recent graduates, and learners who left post-secondary education within the past two years without completing their program. Respondents shared their experiences with WIL participation, motivations, barriers, disclosure decisions, support needs, and challenges during placements. This issue briefing presents findings from that survey and identifies practical actions post-secondary institutions can take to make WIL more accessible, inclusive, and supportive for neurodivergent learners.

Ethics

Veritas, an independent research ethics board, reviewed this research project and approved all instruments. The survey collected responses anonymously, and we guaranteed participant confidentiality.



Survey data

To examine the experiences of neurodivergent learners in work-integrated learning (WIL), we surveyed 407 neurodivergent individuals across Canada. The sample reflects diverse learner backgrounds, including students of different gender identities, ages, provinces, and intersectional identities. (See Table 1.)

Table 1
Sociodemographic profile of respondents

Gender	n	Per cent
Women	234	57.5
Men	146	35.9
Non-binary	20	4.9
Gender queer	4	1.0
Additional identities	2	0.5
Prefer not to say	1	0.2
Age	**n**	**Per cent**
18–25	263	64.6
26–35	108	26.5
36–45	22	5.4
46–55	11	2.7
55+	3	0.7

Province	n	Per cent
British Columbia	45	11.1
Alberta	54	13.3
Saskatchewan	12	2.9
Manitoba	21	5.2
Ontario	140	34.4
Quebec	113	27.8
New Brunswick	3	0.7
Nova Scotia	11	2.7
Prince Edward Island	3	0.7
Newfoundland	4	1.0
Yukon	1	0.2
Intersectional identities	**n**	**Per cent**
Disabled/person with a disability	97	23.8
Racialized Canadian/person of colour	84	20.6
Indigenous	25	6.1
LGBTQIA2S+	112	27.5
Newcomer	11	2.7
Refugee	3	0.7
International student	22	5.4

Note: No data for Nunavut and Northwest Territories.
Source: Signal49 Research.

The sample also includes representation from universities, colleges, CEGEPs, and polytechnic or institutes of technology programs. (See Table 2.)

Table 2
Program and institutional affiliation of respondent

Program of study	**n**	**Per cent**
Basic education and skills	15	3.7
Trades or apprenticeship	25	6.1
Diploma or certificate	73	17.9
Undergraduate	214	52.6
Graduate	49	12.0
Professional (e.g., medical school)	24	5.9
Post-graduate	7	1.7
Institution type	**n**	**Per cent**
Polytechnic or institute of technology	23	5.7
College or CEGEP	105	25.8
University	272	66.8
Other: please specify	7	1.7

Source: Signal49 Research.

To achieve a national sample, we worked with Leger to administer the survey to learners across Canada. Participants were recruited through an online panel, targeting individuals who were current students, recent graduates (graduated within the past two years), and learners who left post-secondary within the past two years without completing the program. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to be 18 years of age or older and identify as neurodivergent, including those self-identified or with a formal diagnosis.

Reported challenges during WIL were assessed by asking respondents to rate their agreement with listed challenges on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Responses were re-coded into five categories: 1 = strongly disagree, 2–3 = disagree, 4 = neutral, 5–6 = agree, and 7 = strongly agree.

Data analysis

We conducted univariate analyses to examine the distribution of key variables. These included neurodivergent identity, participation in WIL, motivations for pursuing WIL, reasons for not pursuing WIL, disclosure rates to institution and employer, reported challenges during WIL, type of institution attended, field of study, and socio-demographic characteristics. We conducted a cross-tabulation analysis and Pearson's chi-square tests of independence to examine whether rates of work-integrated learning (WIL) participation differed across neurodivergent identity groups. We cleaned and analyzed survey data using SPSS.

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Jennifer Fane

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