

Neuroinclusive Policies and practices in Post-secondary Education

Findings from a national study on the neuroinclusivity of Canadian higher
education

Jane Hutchison, PhD, Senior Manager, Future Skills Research

Research advisory board



**Wanda
Deschamps**

Principal,
Liberty Co
Consulting



**Radha
MacCulloch**

CEO,
Specialisterne
Canada



**Dr. Megan
Ames**

Assistant
Professor,
University of
Victoria



**Dr. Carly
McMorris**

Associate
Professor,
University of
Calgary



**Ameera
Azam**

Research &
Engagement
Facilitator,
ESYD



**Andrea
Hoff**

PhD
Candidate,
University of
British
Columbia

Publications and Resources

Navigating Higher Education: A Neurodivergent Student Guide



The Conference Board of Canada In partnership with **Future Skills Centre** **Centre des Compétences futures**

Navigating Higher Education A Neurodivergent Student's Guide

As a neurodivergent learner, your success at university or college starts with knowing the tips and tricks to help you succeed.

This guide includes key information on how to prepare for higher education as a neurodivergent learner. These tips and tricks are meant to help set you up for success and make your transition easier.

1. Find out about your school's accessibility services
Accessibility services are there for students who need them. They include help with adjusting to your environment, accommodations, and access to additional supports like mental health services, mentorship programs, tutoring, and assistive technology. Check out accessibility services before you start so you know what support is available when you need it.

Tip: Take a campus tour or visit the accessibility services webpage before you start to learn about your school's available services and how to register.

2. Prepare for new communication expectations
You will be expected to communicate effectively with many different teaching faculty, administrative staff, and peers. However, many neurodivergent students we spoke with found communication at college and university challenging because the expectations for student communication are higher than expectations in high school. Challenges neurodivergent students shared with us include:

- explaining their learning needs to each instructor/professor
- requesting support or accommodations before deadlines
- responding to emails
- active participation in class (asking questions, clarifying assignment details)
- group work and building relationships with peers

3. Be informed about the disclosure process
Disclosure means informing your school about a diagnosis (like a learning disability, autism, ADHD, or mental health issue) that affects learning. If you think you would benefit from accommodations, you'll need to decide whether you want to disclose your diagnosis. To receive accommodations, you'll need to disclose and register with accessibility services by providing recent, formal documentation (usually within the past five years). A high school Individual Education Plan (IEP) alone does not guarantee accommodations. If you have or had accommodations in high school, they will need to be adapted to your new learning environment.

Tip: Accessibility services can guide you on the documentation they need. Contact them three to four months before you start if you have questions about the disclosure or registration process, since setting up accommodations takes time.

Summary for executives | January 15, 2025
The responsibility for the findings and conclusions of this research rests entirely with The Conference Board of Canada.

Research Report: Survey Data



The Conference Board of Canada In partnership with **Future Skills Centre** **Centre des Compétences futures**

Making the Invisible Visible

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education

Issue briefing | November 12, 2024

Research Report: Final Report



The Conference Board of Canada In partnership with **Future Skills Centre** **Centre des Compétences futures**

Creating Inclusive Campuses

Neuroinclusive Policies and Practices in Post-Secondary Education

Impact paper | February 5, 2025



Project overview

1. What institutional policies and practices do neurodivergent students identify as barriers or enablers to their participation in post-secondary education?
2. What challenges are Canadian PSIs facing in the provision of inclusive and accessible education for neurodivergent students?
3. What innovations are currently being implemented to support neurodivergent students in Canadian PSIs?

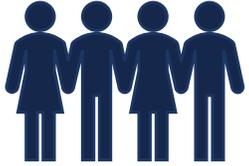
Methodology

Literature review	What do we know about neurodivergent student experiences in PSE? What are the gaps?	Completed: Dec. 2023
Online survey Neurodivergent students and recent graduates (n=400)	What are the barriers and enablers to neurodivergent students' participation and inclusion in PSE?	Completed: March 2024
Semi-structured interviews Neurodivergent students and recent graduates (n=45) PSI accessibility leadership (n=17) PSI accessibility staff (n=16)	What practices and policies are in place relating to neurodiversity in Canadian PSIs?	Completed June 2024

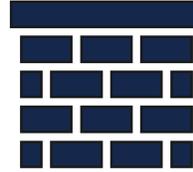
Key findings



Summary of key findings



1. Profiles of neurodivergent learners



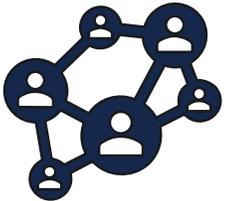
4. Barriers to participation



2. Redefining who belongs



5. Impactful supports

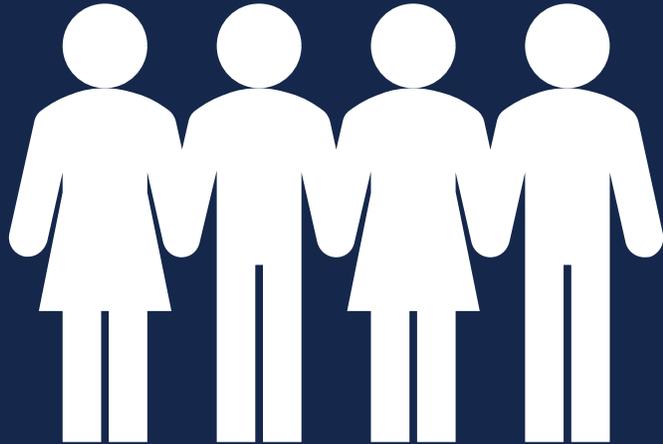


3. Siloed institutional knowledge



6. (Re)considering institutional policy

Profiles of neurodivergent learners

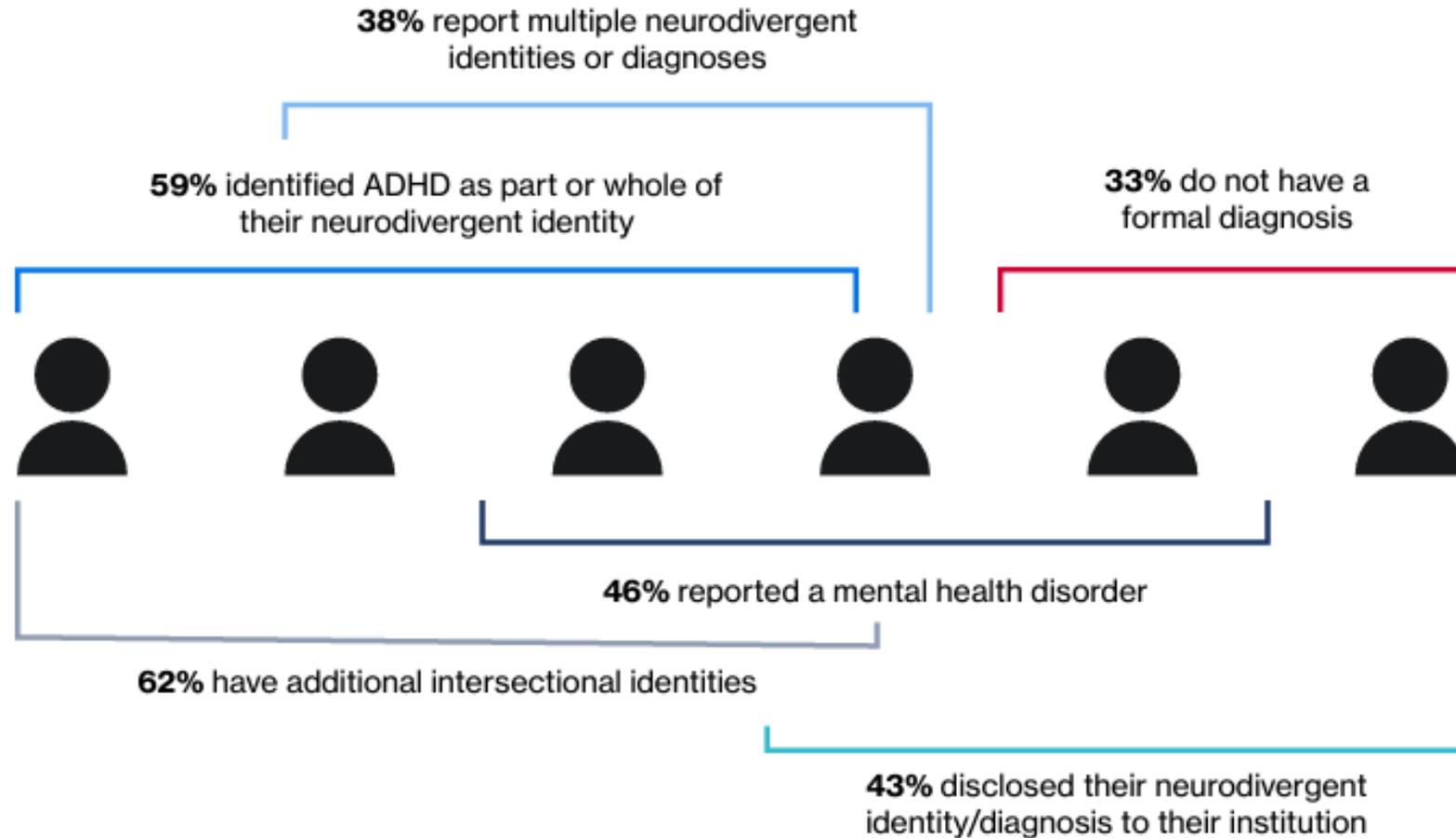


What are key characteristics of the neurodivergent student population?

- We wanted to know:
 - the reported incidence rates of identities and diagnoses under the neurodivergent umbrella
 - what additional intersectional identities do neurodivergent students hold?
 - what percentage of neurodivergent students have a clinical diagnoses? What percentage self-identify?
 - What percentage of students disclose their neurodivergent identity/diagnosis to their institution?

Exhibit 1

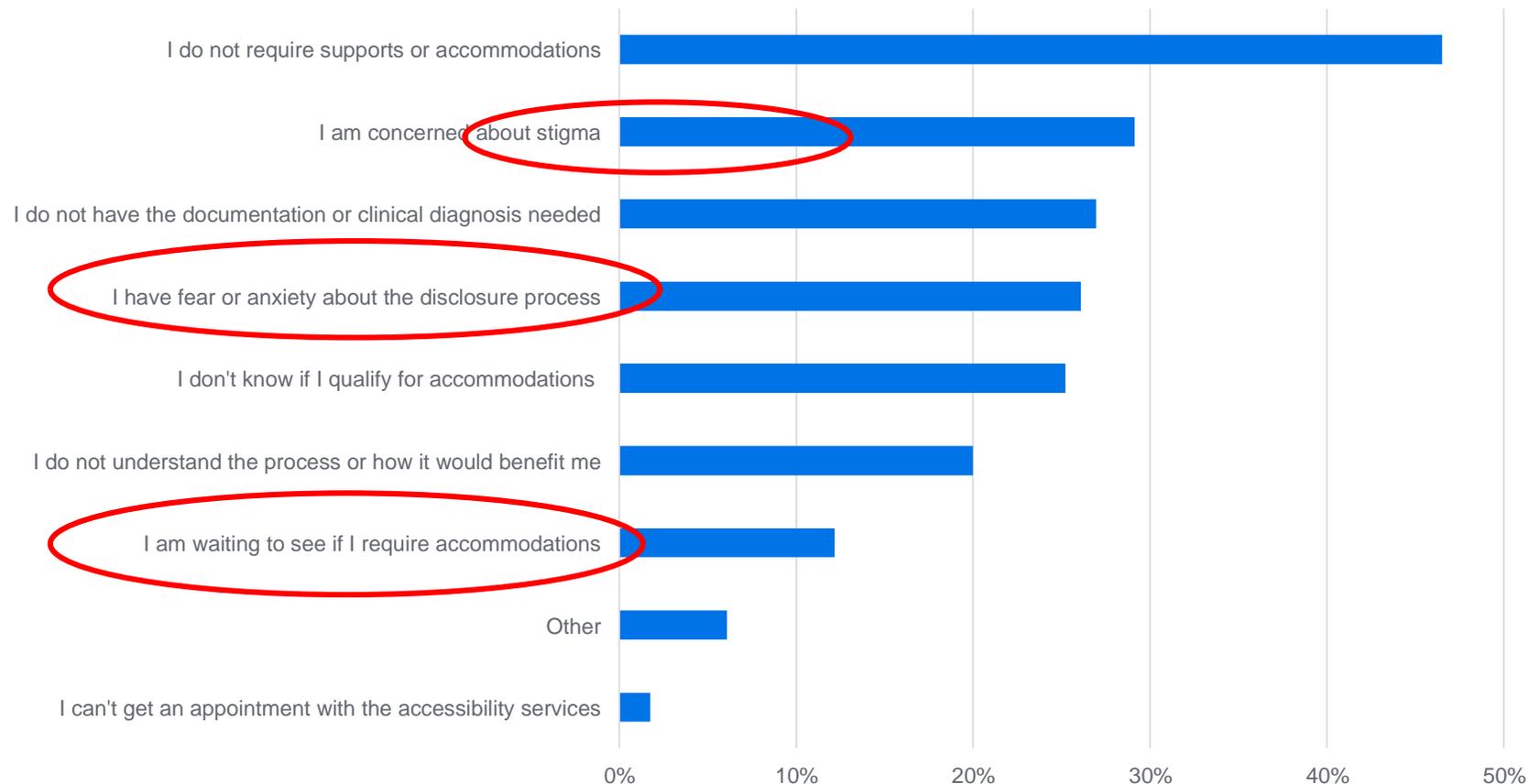
Who are neurodivergent learners?



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Less than half of neurodivergent students choose to disclose their neurodivergent status

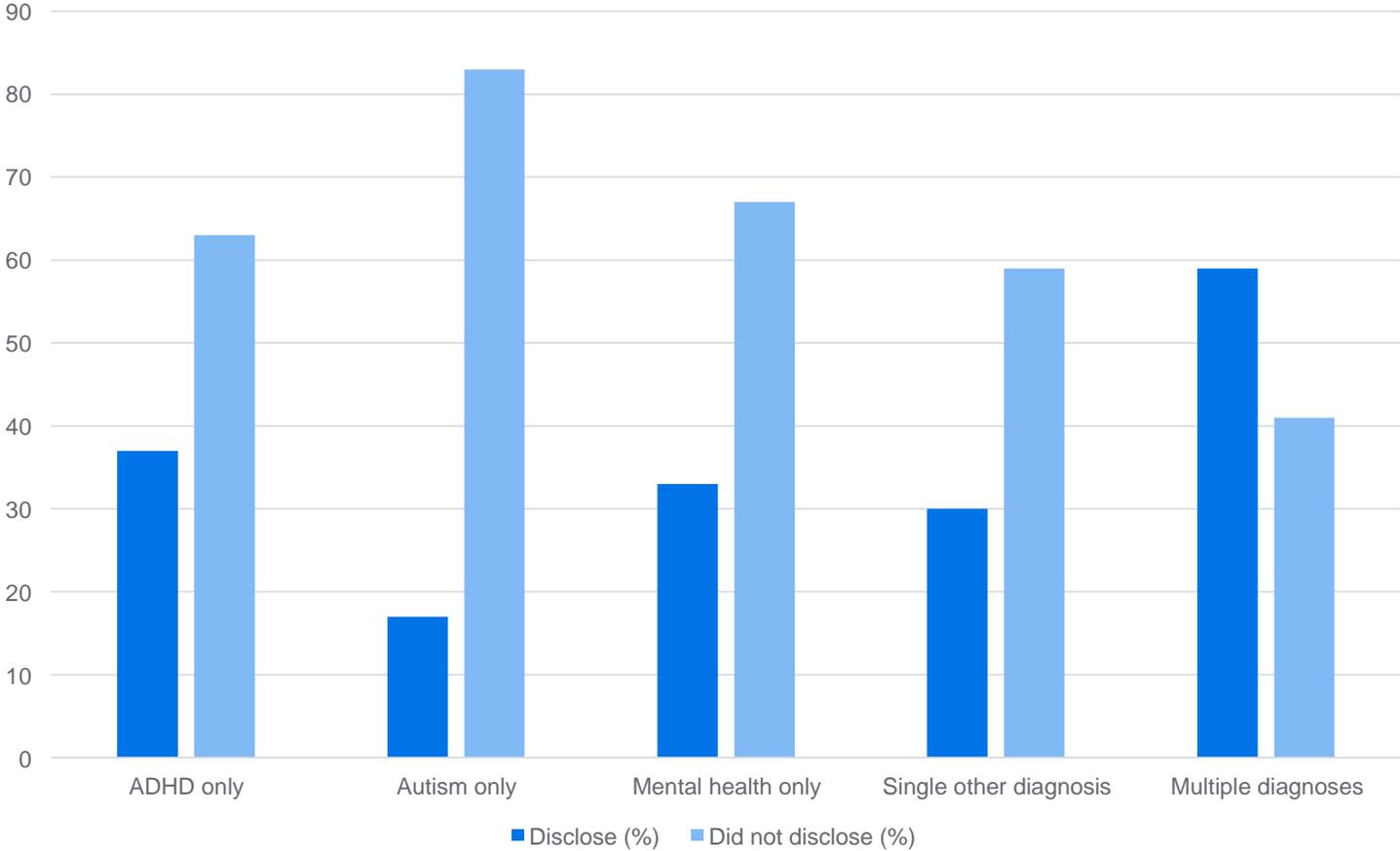
Q. Why did you choose not to disclose? Check all that apply:



While less than half disclose, 73% of those who did not disclose identified at least one barrier to disclosure

Source: The Conference Board of Canada. n=230

Disclosure Rates by Identity/Diagnosis Type



Source: The Conference Board of Canada. N=400

Redefining who belongs



Barriers to belonging

- Neurodivergent students' historical exclusion from higher education has led to harmful beliefs that they don't belong.
- Participants report discriminatory beliefs about neurodivergent learners that lead to exclusionary practices both in and out of the classroom.
- These perceptions lead some neurodivergent students to hide their identity, fearing it will affect how they are treated and limit their future opportunities.

Knowledge gaps on the role of accommodations

I had accommodations 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 accommodation would likely not make much of a difference.

– College disabilities counsellor

Siloed institutional knowledge



- PSIs have pockets of expertise and potential knowledge leaders on neuroinclusive practices:
 - accessibility services
 - counselling and wellbeing services
 - centres for teaching and learning
 - critical disability studies

- PSI staff identified these practices to help PSIs build knowledge, address stigma, and create a more inclusive and safer environment for ND students:
 - cross-institutional appointments (faculty in advising, advising in faculties)
 - faculty training
 - administrative, support, and services staff training

Gatekeeping a roadblock to inclusion

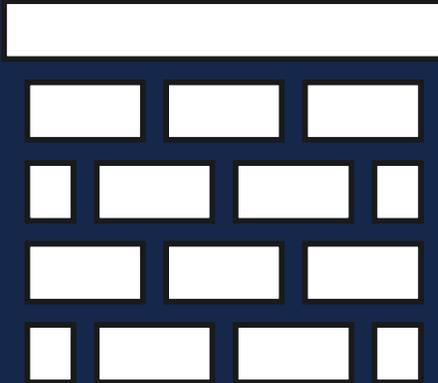
There is a dynamic where the teaching faculty assume a **gatekeeper role**. They say “I know my profession. I know what the worker looks like, sounds like. And if you don't fit that, then are you really ready for this profession?” **They look at accommodations running contrary to what the profession 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

I think more training would be beneficial for any faculty or staff member that connects with a student, including teaching assistants and the writing centre. **Anyone who comes in contact with students should have access to training tools** or regulations in place.

– Neurodivergent undergraduate student

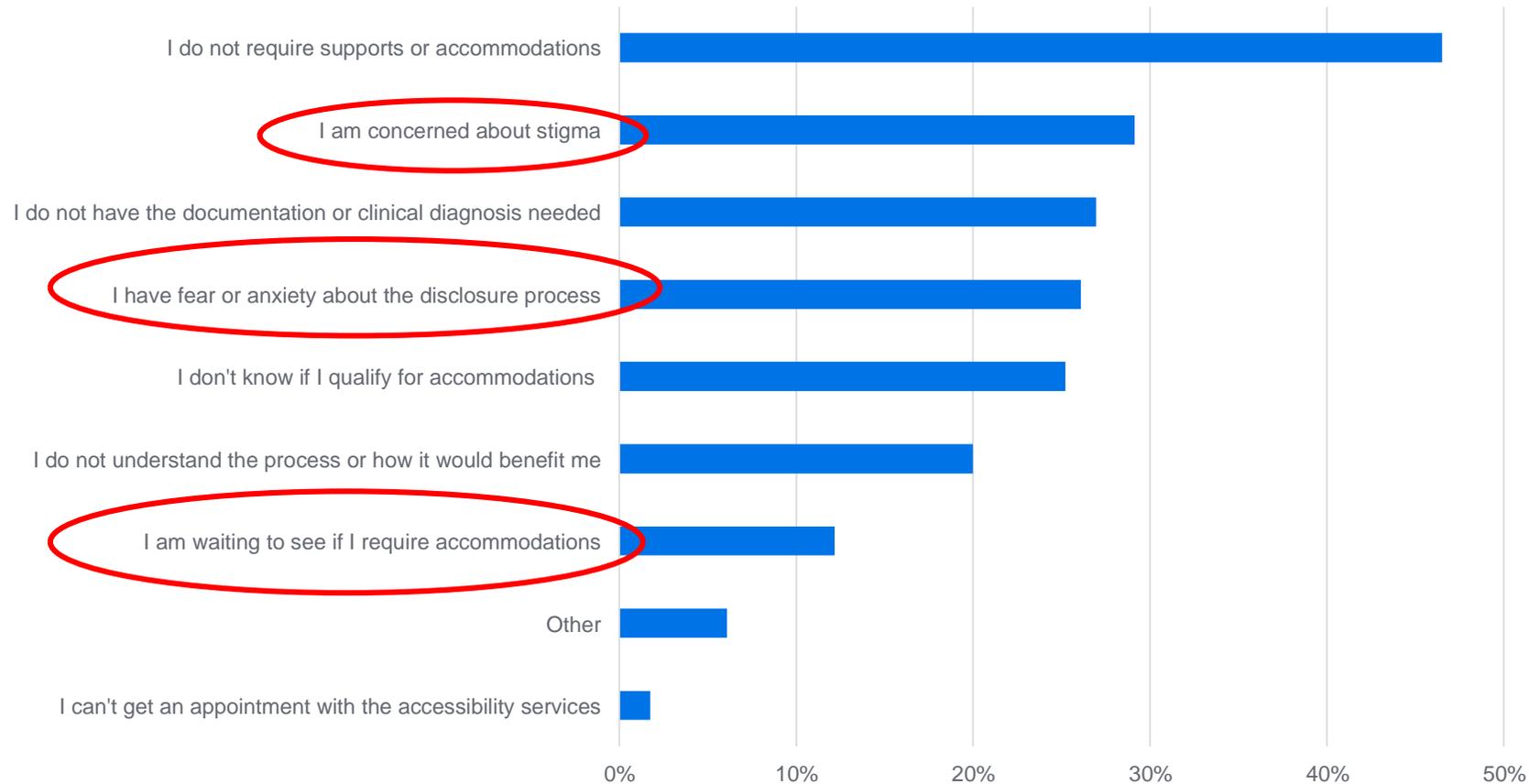
Barriers to participation



- Participants reported executive function skills, the pace of post-secondary learning, and communication, social interactions and group work as significant barriers
- Most interview participants identified barriers and challenges in registering with accessibility services
- Additional barriers included:
 - A lack of information about course or program requirements
 - syllabi availability
 - information about work-integrated learning requirements
 - Lack of flexibility of systems and timelines
 - reduced course load
 - drop/withdrawal dates
 - The built environment
 - lack of safe spaces
 - classroom design challenges
 - location and connectedness of services

Less than half of neurodivergent students choose to disclose their neurodivergent status

Q. Why did you choose not to disclose? Check all that apply:



While less than half disclose, 73% of those who did not disclose identified at least one barrier to disclosure

Source: The Conference Board of Canada. n=230

Navigating accessibility services is a challenge

My greatest challenge so far is, 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.

– Neurodivergent graduate student

We're looking at the registration process that requires documentation and filling out certain forms and doing it within a timeline. And it requires a heavy degree of executive function, which when we're talking about a student with an ADHD, presents as challenge. So, we're **looking at ways of removing all of that, so that the student can do the intake with ways that make sense to them.**

– Manager, University accessibility services



Encountering knowledge gaps on the role of accommodations

I had accommodations 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 accommodation would likely not make much of a difference.

– College disabilities counsellor

Supporting neurodivergent learners with the disclosure decision

- Discuss pros and cons of disclosure with the learner, ensure that they understand the disclosure process, and are confident with their decision
- If choosing to disclose, the learner may benefit from the following supports:
 - Practicing the disclosure process (i.e. mock disclosure process)
 - Scripting responses/creating templates
 - Support learners in knowing their rights and where to go for help if/when needed.
- Ensure students know their rights and where to go for help if their rights are not being upheld

Differences between K-12 and PSE

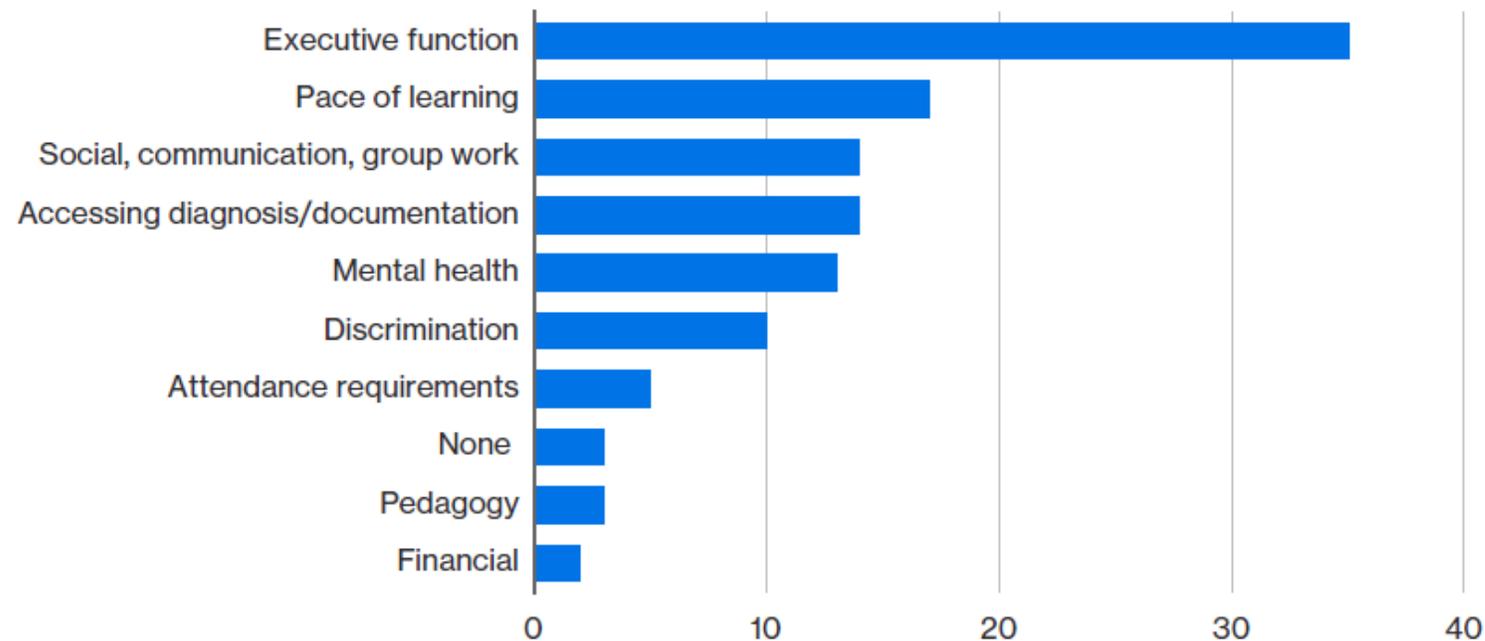
- Documentation and requirements
- Reasonable accommodation definition, administration, and oversight
- Changes to accommodations
- Parental involvement
- Deadlines and expectations
- Self-advocacy expectations

Common challenges continued

- Taking a 'wait and see' approach to registration with accessibility services and not having supports in place
- Not asking for clarification of instructions or assignments in class or via office hours
- Allocating time for reading/assignments outside of class time
- Pace of learning and difficulty of learning/assignments
- Course load
- Lack of awareness of supports available

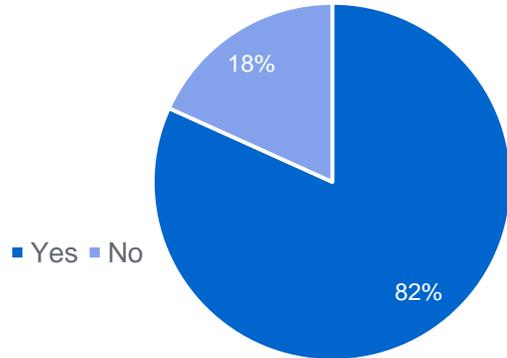
Reported barriers to post-secondary education

Q: In just a few words, what are the biggest barriers (challenges) you've faced as a neurodivergent student in post-secondary education? (thematically coded responses)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada. N=370

Barriers to accessing accommodations

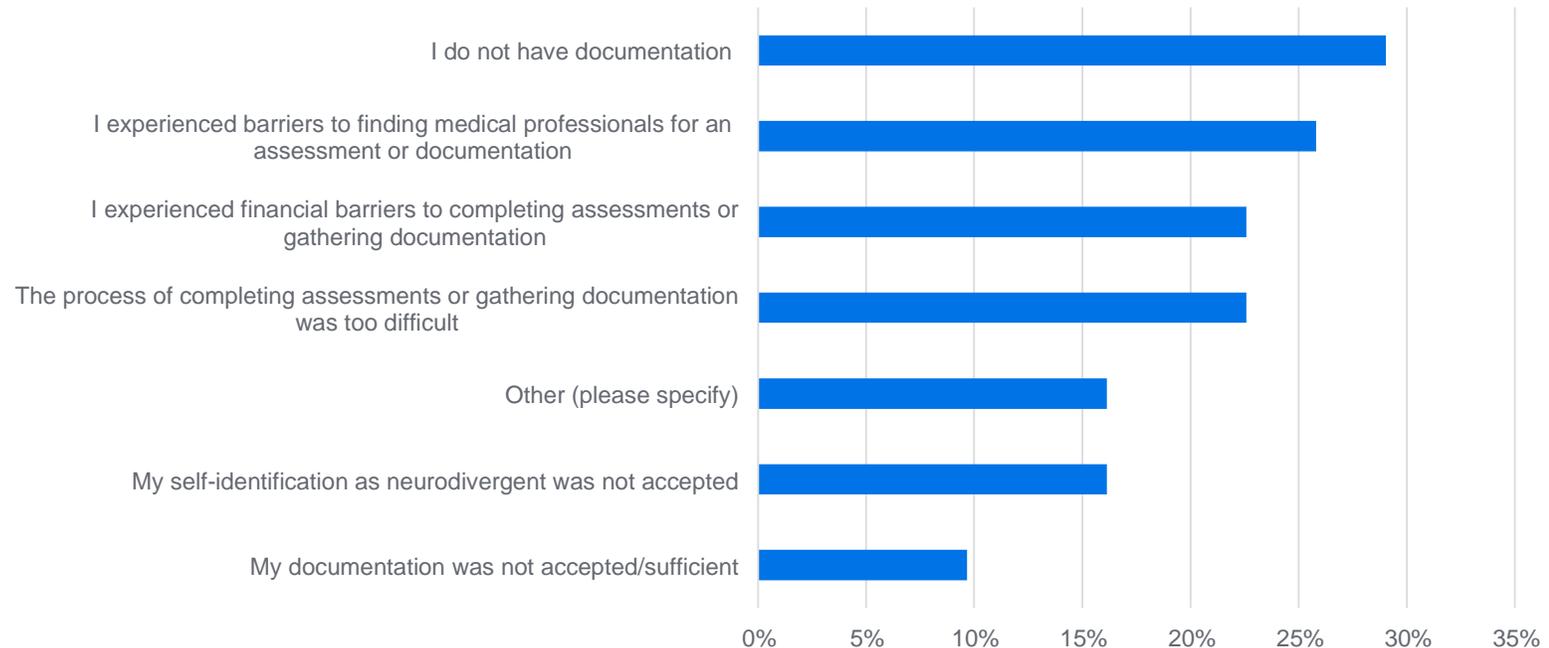


Q. Were you able to receive accommodations for learning through the accessibility centre at your institution?:

Source: The Conference Board of Canada. n=170

**Q. Why were you not able to receive accommodations?
Check all that apply:**

Source: The Conference Board of Canada. n=31



Navigating accessibility services is a challenge

My greatest challenge so far is, 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.

– Neurodivergent graduate student

We're looking at the registration process that requires documentation and filling out certain forms and doing it within a timeline. And it requires a heavy degree of executive function, which when we're talking about a student with an ADHD, presents as challenge. So, we're **looking at ways of removing all of that, so that the student can do the intake with ways that make sense to them.**

– Manager, University accessibility services

Changing communication expectations



Post-secondary students are expected to communicate effectively with many different teaching faculty, administrative staff, and peers.

However, many neurodivergent students we spoke with found communication at college and university challenging because the expectations for student communication are higher than expectations in high school.

Challenges neurodivergent reported included:

- requesting support or accommodations before deadlines
- responding to emails
- active participation in class (asking questions, clarifying assignment details)
- group work and building relationships with peers
- social isolation



Supporting neurodivergent learners with communication expectations

- Neurodivergent learners benefit from having a trusted support person to discuss challenges or find solutions to common challenges such as:
 - Understanding expectations (both course/academic based and ‘hidden curriculum’)
 - Communicating with instructors/faculty and peers
 - Completing group work and working collaboratively with peers



Building community to combat social isolation

Many neurodivergent students reported often facing challenges with social interactions in PSE, including completing group work, solving conflicts, making friends, and building community. Social and emotional supports currently being offered across Canadian PSIs include:

- 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



Mentorship programs

I was recently in a program called NextGen* [that] provided spaces for having open conversations with professionals who are already way ahead in their journeys. **Having those conversations and hearing lived experiences from people with disabilities is key.**

– Neurodivergent undergraduate student

Mental health and wellbeing supports

Our university is actually leading the pathway, I want to say, in mental health and wellness and just general health and well-being. So, I know we have a lot of programming, or they'll do like six- to eight-week courses where you go once a week for an hour or two. And there's a sleep hygiene one...and a stress management one.

– Neurodivergent undergraduate student

There's also a psychiatrist that comes to campus once, twice a month to see students. There's a psychologist who works jointly between student services and the [psychology doctorate program] program. So, we have counsellors who will do cognitive behavioral therapy and see students who have anxiety and depression and OCD. So, there's definitely an increase in supports over the last few years.

– Manager, University Accessibility Services

Strengthen executive function skills



Neurodivergent students face greater challenges with executive function skills than their neurotypical peers. This includes skills such as working memory (remembering what you read/hear), attention and focus, starting tasks, organization and planning, and self-regulation, which are all essential for learning. A lack of information about course or program requirements.

The faster pace of learning in university and college requires strong executive function skills for day-to-day learning activities such as:

- staying focused during lectures
- keeping up with assigned readings
- completing assignments on time
- allocating time for schoolwork outside of class time
- requesting accommodations before deadlines (for example, submitting a request to write an exam in an alternate location)

Many institutions have developed programming and materials to support study and executive-function skill development. Offerings and opportunities to address 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

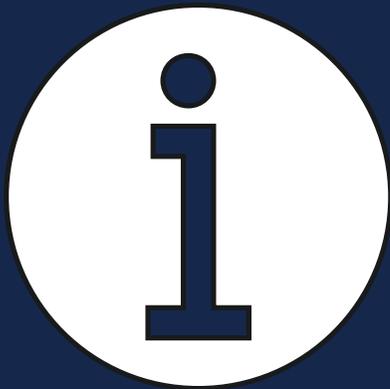
“I think a common misunderstanding in post-secondary education is that ADHD is a problem of focus, when really, it’s a problem of motivation and barriers to establishing tasks. So I think that the study skills class I took as part of my reduced course load [pathway] really helped me form strategies to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

- University undergraduate student

Tips for those supporting neurodivergent learners

- Support learner in identifying individual learning preferences, and functional support needs, such as:
 - Staying on task
 - Note taking
 - Procrastination
 - Study skills
 - Keeping track of assignments and exams
- If a learner is wanting to take a 'wait and see' approach as to whether they may need functional supports, engage them in discussing the pros and cons of this approach so they feel more empowered in their decision making.
- Have learners explore supports for study skills and executive function at their school
- Explore assistive technology applications including both software and hardware

Impactful supports

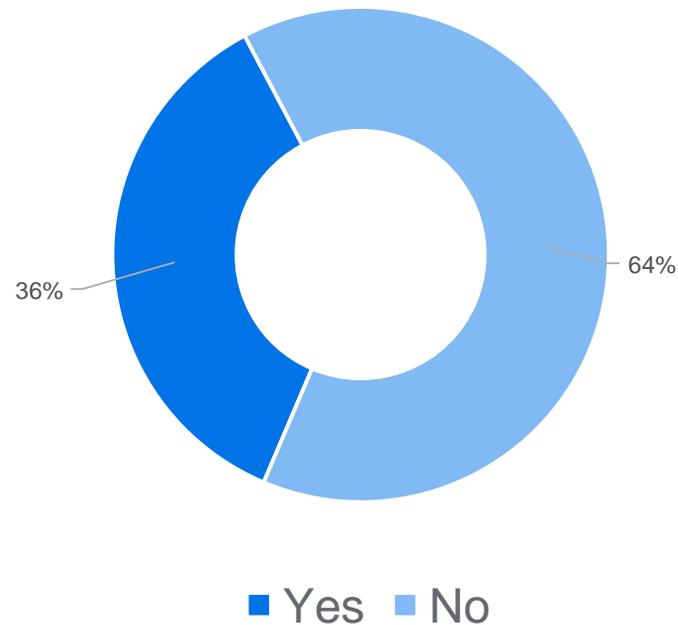


Students and staff reported the following supports as useful or desirable:

- Mental health services
 - counselling; clinical assessments; inter-institution referrals
- Executive function skill development
 - sustaining focus and attention; study skills; organization skills
- Social groups
 - support groups; social opportunities
- Mentorship
 - peer tutoring; career transition
- Assistive technology
 - scribe pens
 - graphic organizers
- Artificial Intelligence
 - writing support
 - study skills support

Approximately 1/3 of neurodivergent students accessed supports

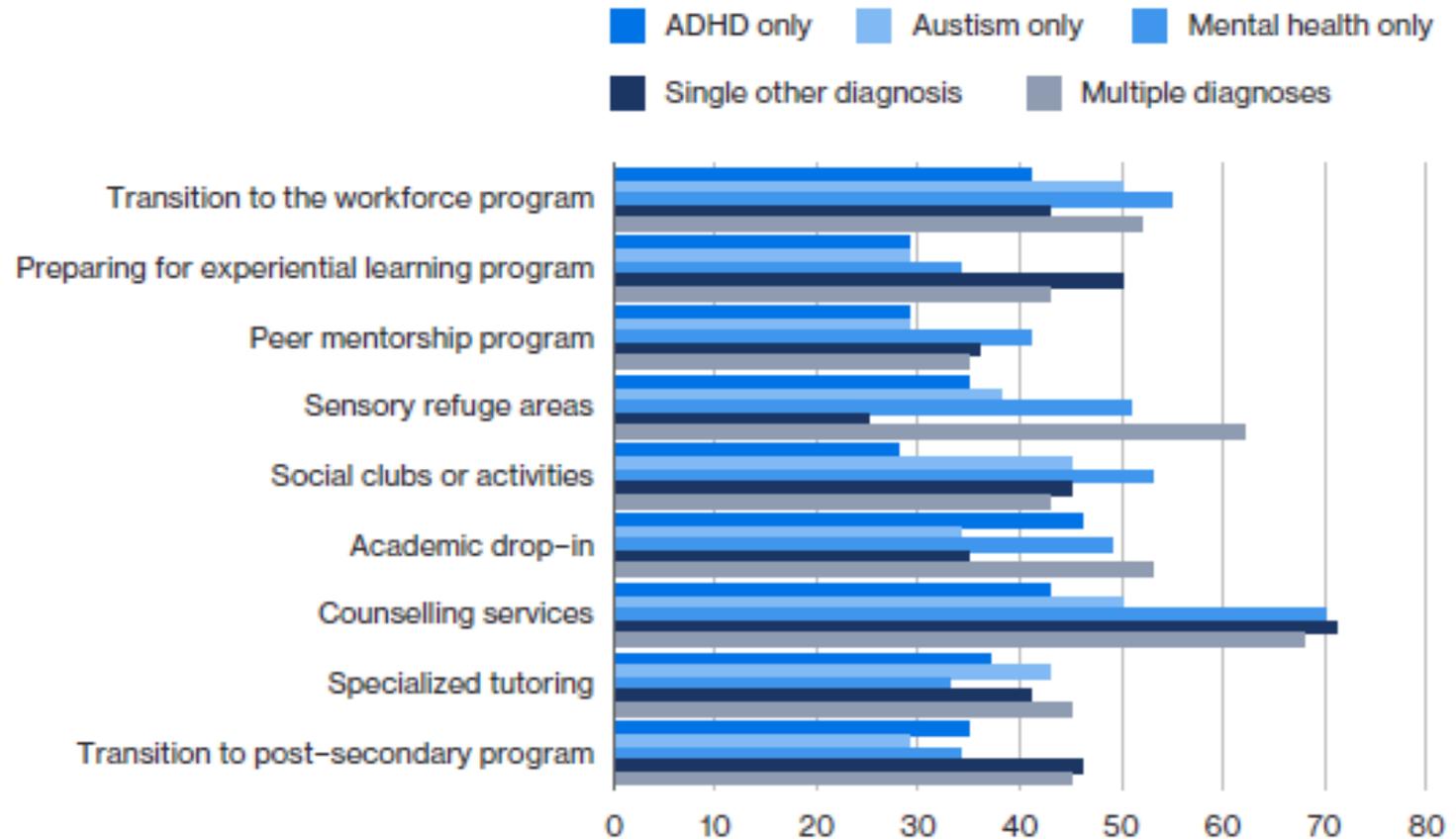
Q: Have you accessed supports or opportunities for neurodivergent students?



Source: The Conference Board of Canada. N=400

60% of students would access counselling services if available

Q: Would you use or participate in the following opportunities for neurodivergent students if they were available at your institution?



Mentorship programs

I was recently in a program called NextGen* [that] provided spaces for having open conversations with professionals who are already way ahead in their journeys. **Having those conversations and hearing lived experiences from people with disabilities is key.**

– Neurodivergent undergraduate student

Mental health and wellbeing

Our university is actually leading the pathway, I want to say, in mental health and wellness and just general health and well-being. So, I know we have a lot of programming, or they'll do like six- to eight-week courses where you go once a week for an hour or two. And there's a sleep hygiene one...and a stress management one.

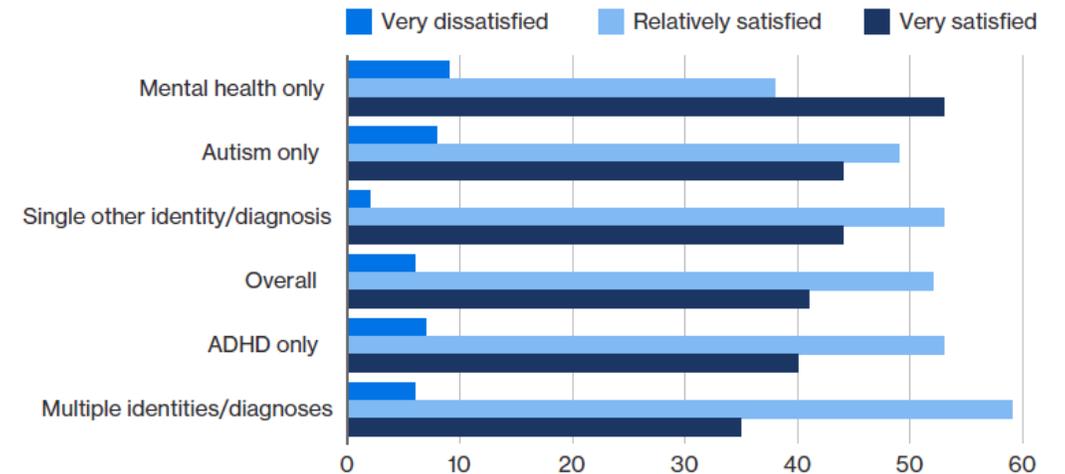
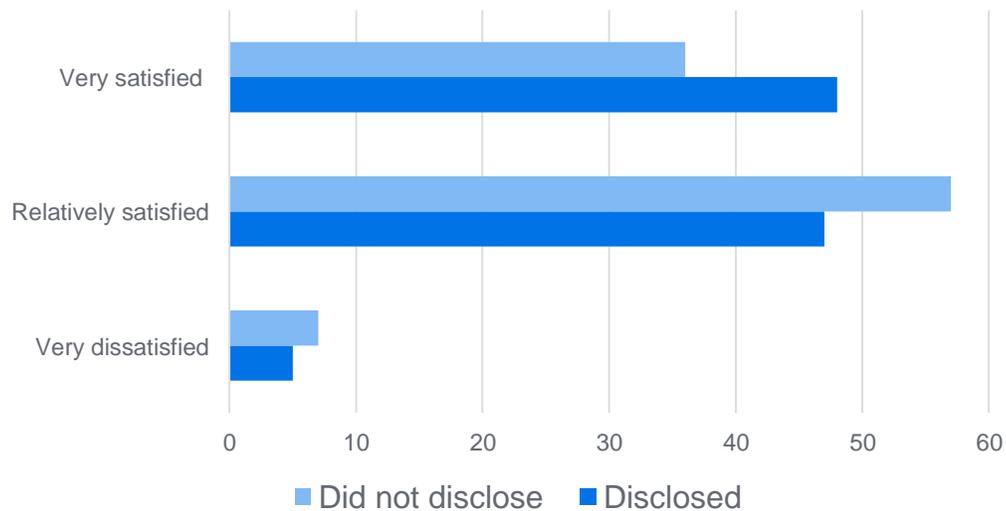
– Neurodivergent undergraduate student

There's also a psychiatrist that comes to campus once, twice a month to see students. There's a psychologist who works jointly between student services and the [psychology doctorate program] program. So, we have counsellors who will do cognitive behavioral therapy and see students who have anxiety and depression and OCD. So, there's definitely an increase in supports over the last few years.

– Manager, University Accessibility Services

Satisfaction with post-secondary institution by respondent disclosure status

Q: On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied), indicate your level of overall satisfaction with your post-secondary institution?



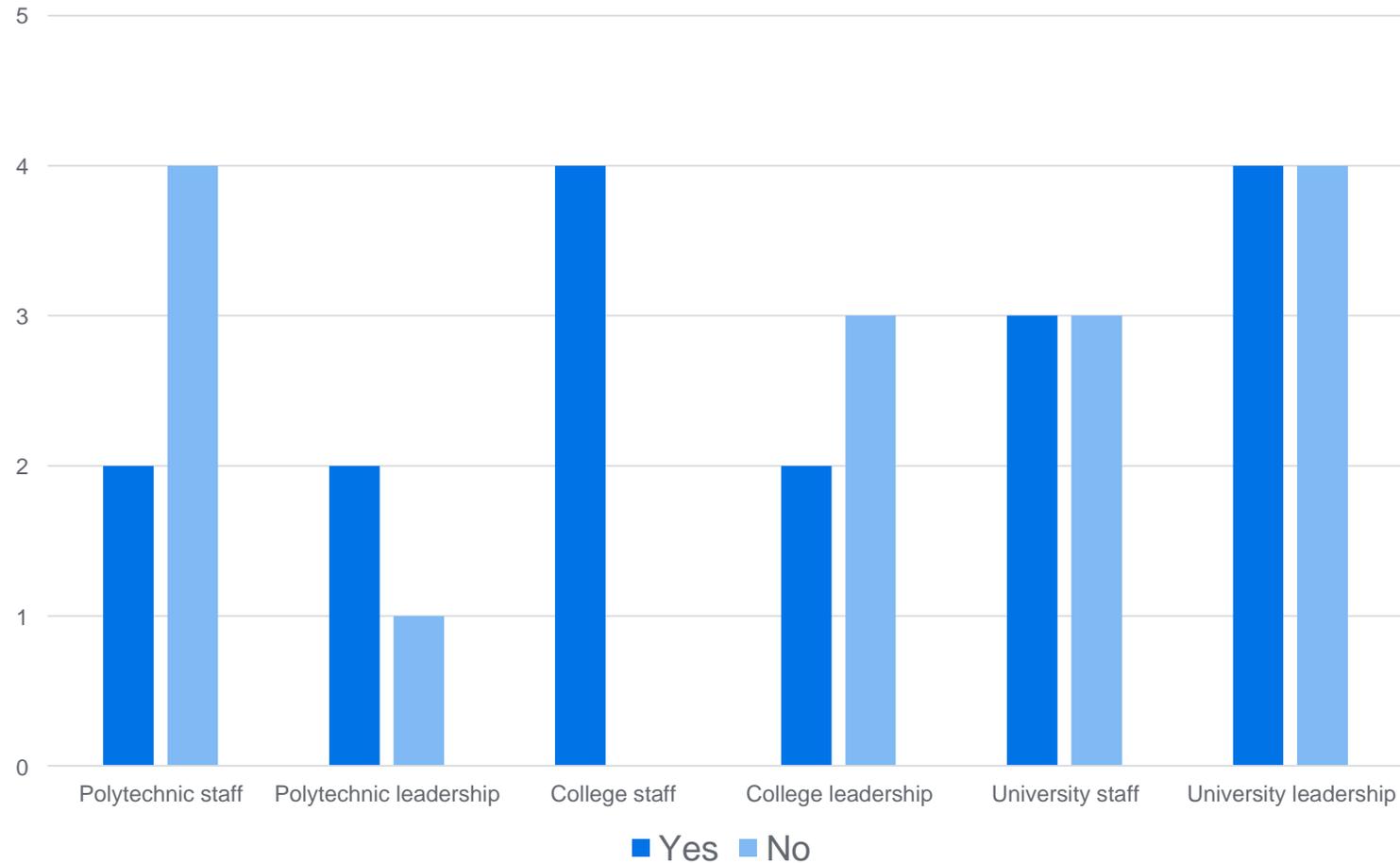
Source: The Conference Board of Canada. N=400. Note: Satisfaction with PSI was assessed on a scale from 1 to 10 and recoded as 'very dissatisfied' (scores from 1 to 3), 'relatively satisfied' (scored from 4 to 7), and 'very satisfied' (scores from 8 to 10)

(Re)considering institutional policy



- Almost half of PSI staff and leadership participants (47%) reported that neurodiversity was **not** adequately represented in their institution's EDI policy.
- Some ways PSIs are engaging with neurodiversity in policy are:
 - using inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA) language/frameworks rather than EDI
 - engaging with lived experiences (staff and students) to inform policy development
 - creating new appointments/roles and institutional restructuring to support EDI work

Q: Do you think neurodiversity is adequately considered and represented in your institution's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion strategic planning and policies?



Source: The Conference Board of Canada. n=32

Accessibility largely invisible in EDI frameworks at many post-secondary institutions

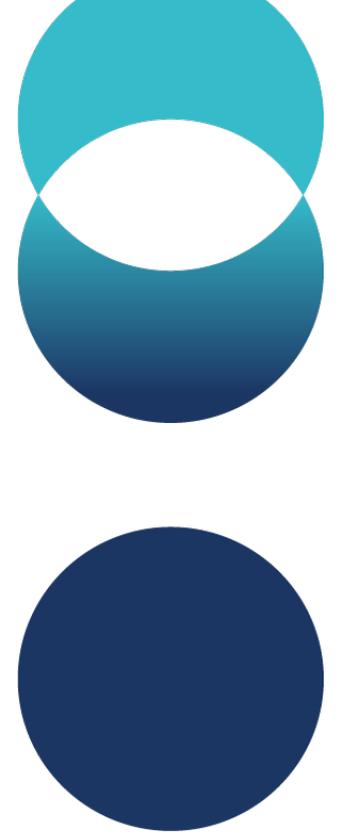
I feel like we're constantly requesting to be invited to tables. In our EDI Initiative, accessibility falls to the wayside. We have to **consistently fight** for accessibility to be considered.

– Polytechnic accessibility advisor

Also, there's a push for EDI to actually be EDI-A. And so, neurodiversity, I think, fits into accessibility...parts of it fit into disability. It's definitely equity and inclusion and it is diversity. When we add the A onto the EDI, neurodiversity really fits under those principles. Because **it's still not recognized, policy-wise**, from an identity practice; that's where it's missing the mark.

– University accessibility support advisor

Recommendations



Recommendations for Post-Secondary Institutions

- 1 Implement mandatory neurodiversity training for all campus employees to address the barriers ND students face and reduce stigma.
- 2 Adopt a neuroinclusive and neuro-affirming wrap-around service or 'Hub' model to offer coordinated support across academic, accessibility, and mental health services.
- 3 Integrate accessibility into institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategic planning and policy development. Set measurable outcomes to track progress and ensure accountability.
- 4 Provide ND students with information relevant to their learning profiles and types of supports and services that support with their functional needs and develop their self-advocacy skills
- 5 Create channels and opportunities for neurodivergent students, staff, and faculty to contribute to EDI and accessibility policies.



Where insights
meet impact