**State of the Schools Report**

Report on the State of Canadian Post-Secondary Education and Accessibility

Seeking Equitable, Attainable, and Accessible Learning Through Advocacy Efforts

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**About NEADS**

The National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS), founded in 1986, is a cross-disability charitable organization dedicated to improving opportunities in higher education and the labour market for persons with disabilities through debt reduction, better student and graduate experience, and employment.

NEADS provides expert advice and resources to support higher education for Canadians with disabilities, including a comprehensive website, financial aid portal, skill training resources, research, and events. NEADS provides resources and skill development to students with disabilities through their national office, regional events, the Breaking It Down employment portal: http://breakingitdown.neads.ca/, information and referrals, and three scholarship programs.

NEADS administers these unique scholarship programs: the NEADS National Student Awards Program, the NEADS Holly Bartlett Memorial Award, and the NEADS Christine Nieder Memorial Award. The awards, amounting to $3,000, $1,000, and $1,000, respectively, serve a broad spectrum of academic levels from undergraduate to college and cegep-level programs. These programs acknowledge the academic and community accomplishments of post-secondary students with disabilities.

Now in its seventh year, the NEADS National Student Awards Program has garnered over 1,000 applications, granting 63 scholarships to exceptional candidates nationwide. These initiatives are crucial for supporting disabled students, who often require additional financial aid for academic success due to campus accommodation needs. NEADS is a registered charity organization in Canada.

They accept tax-deductible donations, offering donors a charitable tax receipt corresponding to 100% of their donations. It offers financial support to students across all fields of study, ensuring equal access to educational opportunities.

### **NEADS Websites**

<http://www.neads.ca>

<http://www.disabilityawards.ca>

<http://www.disabilityrightsonline.ca>

<http://www.breakingitdown.neads.ca>

### **NEADS Social Media**

@MyNeads on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/myneads/), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/myNEADS), and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/myNEADS)

LinkedIn:<https://www.linkedin.com/company/805448>

## Executive Summary

This State of the Schools report comprehensively examines Canada's accessibility to post-secondary education (PSE) for students with disabilities. This report examines the accessibility and quality of college and university programs nationwide, focusing on affordability and student success rates. In addition, this report provides an overview of key initiatives from student-led organizations participating in the State of the Schools Tour aimed at improving accessibility to educational opportunities, such as bursaries and grants.

The report will evaluate relevant case studies to determine the impact of post-secondary education on students in diverse disabled communities across Canada. The report considers this impact through the lens of diverse disabled communities from Indigenous students, Francophone students, and those from low-income backgrounds. NEADS explores the disability landscape within Canadian undergraduate, graduate, and post-secondary institutions. This research should uncover insights into fundamental questions:

1. How can students with disabilities navigate graduate studies regarding accommodations, academic and social support systems, and financial aid?
2. How do students with disabilities advocate for access to virtual access for coursework or research?
3. How can students with disabilities customize graduate programs to suit their needs?

This report offers insight into how post-secondary education can be made more accessible to all Canadians by identifying areas for improvement and making recommendations for future initiatives.

## Introduction

This State of the Schools Tour report discusses an overview of Canada's PSE opportunities while focusing on accessibility. The report examines past and current Canadian institution policies, programs, and practices to support disabled students in accessing quality post-secondary education. These tours occurred during 2022-2023, and involved NEADS panel discussions with experts from each of the seven cities visited during the tour.

Topics discussed include self-advocacy, resources for disabled students, how gender and sexual identities affect student access to PSE, how the current system can be improved, access to quality education, and what must happen to achieve it. The report also outlines critical discussions from the tours.

### **State of the Schools Stop - Winnipeg**

During the Winnipeg stop during the State of the Schools Tour, the UWSA via the Access Lounge, the Council of Canadians With Disabilities (CCD), and the Manitoba League of Persons With Disabilities (MLPD) spoke together in a united voice to support people with disabilities and their families. The panelists addressed the availability (or lack of) of resources and services for the unique needs associated with their identities.

Ultimately, the panel reflected on accessible events and conferences for post-secondary students with disabilities. Many of the challenges associated with events and conferences center around the financial barriers of attending and navigating physical access issues. The panelists discussed strategies to make conferences more accessible and inclusive for disabled students in Winnipeg and nationwide.

Moreover, the panel discussed that even virtual access to events could limit disabled academic's ability to participate due to the inaccessibility of materials and presentations. The Access Lounge and its efforts are meant to create an accessible space where disabled academics can feel a sense of community, utilize resources, and meet other disabled people in academia. This creates a network of support that mitigates the barriers they face while pursuing post-secondary education.

The panelists from the UWSA also discussed understanding that being different from non-disabled academics should never be a barrier to success. They discussed that the support provided by such movements should never be a substitute for equal access for disabled students but, instead, an opportunity to build community and provide resources. The association provided a safe space for discussions surrounding struggles of post-secondary struggles but also acted as a community where disabled academics could express their proud accomplishments.

Furthermore, the panelists discussed, the struggles disabled academics have to deal with regarding invading their medical privacy by sending medical documentation for access to accessibility services. Overall, is it necessary to invade the privacy of disabled academics who clearly need the services? Organizations should move away from requiring physical documentation and toward a personal attestation of disability to suffice in the post-secondary system.

In conclusion, the panelists emphasized that disabled students should not be limited to academic success by the lack of physical or financial access. They argued for increased representation and visibility of disabled people in post-secondary institutions, believing that an equal and inclusive playing field was essential for a fair education system.

### **State of the Schools Stop - St. Johns**

During this stop of the State of the Schools Tour, the Memorial University of Newfoundland's Student Union (MUNSU) resource centre, the Memorial University of Newfoundland's Disability Information Support Centre (MUNDISC), and NEADS discussed what these organizations are about, how they support disabled students, and how they collaborate to ensure access for all.

The panelists also discussed the unique experiences of disabled post-secondary students in rural Canada. They shared strategies on how universities can provide more support regarding accessibility, resources, mental health services, and overall accommodations so that rural disabled students have an equitable chance at success. NEADS Research Consultant Elizabeth Mohler also discussed how mentoring works for students dealing with the struggles of PSE.

### State of the Schools Tour - Halifax

The panelists of this State of the Schools tour discussed the Dalhousie Accessibility and Inclusion Society (DAIS), the Dalhousie Disability Advocacy Society (DDAS), the Schulich Disability Alliance (SDA), the Student Group Representatives Panel, followed by student presentations on various topics. This panel was unique in showcasing several university student voices who spoke about their experiences with disability and PSE and their work to help disabled students.

The Schulich Disability Alliance discussed how providing access to an inclusive learning environment creates opportunities for success and highlighted their advocacy work in the Schulich community. Their discussions brought a new perspective to the struggle of disabled students to access PSE and the importance of creating an infrastructure that assists when those barriers arise. The pandemic complicates many of these issues since accommodating online learning was not a priority for some institutions, leaving many disabled students without the support they need.

The Student Group Representatives Panel discussed their efforts in creating an open dialogue between student groups and university administrations to ensure accessibility and inclusion on campus. Together, these initiatives emphasize the importance of providing support services for disabled students in Canada so they can achieve equitable access to education. This tour exposes the continued barriers and lack of accommodations from universities and colleges.

It reveals that despite the current success and progress of increased accessibility, many hurdles remain.

### **State of the Schools Tour – Montreal and Ottawa**

In Montreal, NEADS and AQEIPS at at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Presentations focused on   navigating accommodations in graduate education and accessibility, accommodations, education, and employment for disabled post-secondary students. We also heard from speakers about the work of running your own business as well as creating art as a disabled artist.

 In Ottawa, at Carleton University, the State of the Schools Tour brought together groups such as the Carleton Disability Awareness Centre (CDAC), which provides peer support and community space for students with disabilities, NEADS, and CU Care, which was specifically established in 2021 when disabled students were not allowed to come back to campus for the fall semester. The discussion explored the lack of attendant care services on many campuses and the resulting impact on students who require this support when making post-secondary decisions. It illuminates a movement during the COVID-19 pandemic, championing a holistic care model that tackles the limitations imposed on student attendant care.

In this Q and A, the event explored the unique situation at Carleton University, discussing how attendant care is lacking and its effects on students. Student attendant care can be life-saving for many disabled students: it would provide them with physical and psychological support in a safe environment, enabling them to access quality education.

### State of the Schools Tour - Victoria

During this event, the University of Victoria Students with a Disability (UVIC SSD) and NEADS discussed inclusivity, diversity, equity, and accessibility. Not only that, but to support the #Access4All campaign, a panel of professors (Lindsay DuPre, Jim Tanaka, Chris Willmore, and Hannah Brown) and two disabled student panellists (Emma Levins and Julia Denley) discussed the benefits of Hybrid or HyFlex online access to courses and recorded lectures.

Moreover, the panelists discussed how it could help students with disabilities to attend online courses, allowing them access to higher education without the barriers they face in person. The discussion also touched on the need for student-led advocacy efforts to ensure that universities are meeting the needs of disabled students.

## **Students With Disabilities Navigating Graduate Studies**

Navigating graduate studies is a complex process for any student, but it poses additional challenges for students with disabilities. In Canada, several accommodations and support systems are in place to assist these students in their academic journey. Creating an inclusive and accessible post-secondary educational environment for students with disabilities involves a multi-pronged approach.

Efforts include implementing best practices, utilizing supportive tools, and ensuring equal access to quality education regardless of disability status. Aside from these initiatives, it also requires ingenuity and improvisation from the student. Student-led organizations should be critical in advocating for equitable opportunities for students.

These advocacy efforts have improved awareness of the need for access to educational resources and more robust support systems. Despite their best efforts, the Pandemic has presented an unprecedented challenge for post-secondary students with disabilities. Though the impact of COVID-19 on universities and the Canadian economy is still unfolding, it is clear that the most vulnerable populations were hit hard.

As outlined below, there needs to be a greater emphasis on providing accommodation and support systems.

### **Assistive Technology**

Assistive technology plays a crucial role in supporting students with disabilities. These technologies range from screen readers for visually impaired students to speech-to-text software for those with mobility or learning disabilities. Universities often have dedicated centers where students can access these technologies. However, the level of accessibility can vary depending on the student's needs and the university's resources (Duquette, 2000).

### **Academic Help Centers**

Academic help centers offer various services, including tutoring, study skills workshops, and writing assistance. They play a vital role in accommodating students with learning disabilities by providing specialized tutors trained in strategies for overcoming learning challenges (D'Intino, 2017). Mentorship programs significantly benefit students by providing the necessary support to navigate academic challenges, enhancing the student's educational experience. Mentorships are instrumental for students with disabilities.

A mentor, often an experienced faculty member, guides students through academic processes, normalizes campus resource use, and offers emotional support (Patrick & Wessel, 2013). The mentors can also help students understand their financial aid options (Wallace et al., 2000). Some programs even teach students with learning disabilities how to recruit their own mentors and set goals (Britner et al., 2006).

However, finding suitable mentors is often challenging for students with disabilities (Daughtry et al., 2009). Therefore, institutions and student-led groups need to take active measures to ensure the availability and accessibility of mentors.

### **Funding Opportunities**

Several funding opportunities exist for students with disabilities. These include scholarships, bursaries, and grants. The application procedures and eligibility requirements vary by institution and type of funding (Waterfield & Whelan, 2017). Through NEADS and other student-led groups, many organizations have taken action to create more opportunities for students with disabilities and continue to provide scholarships every year.

### **Note-Taking Assistance**

Note-taking assistance is another common form of support. It may involve providing students with copies of lecture notes or allowing them to record lectures. Some universities also have peer note-taking programs where fellow students share their notes (Cox & Walsh, 1998). Further assistance should require classroom recordings of missed lessons for students with hearing or mobility impairments.

### **Priority Course Registration**

Priority course registration allows students with disabilities to schedule their classes ahead of others. Priority registration ensures they can secure classes that fit their needs, such as those offered when they are most alert or in buildings that are accessible (Hill, 1992).

### **Limitations and Challenges**

Despite these support systems, challenges persist. Socioeconomic status, stigma, and lack of awareness can all hinder access to accommodations. Furthermore, students must self-advocate and initiate access and accommodation processes, which can be challenging for some (Groschl, 2006); (Waterfield & Whelan, 2016). Undergraduate and graduate studies are financially demanding, and students with disabilities face additional financial barriers to completing their studies.

Canada's universities and colleges are trying to accommodate students with disabilities and provide them with the support they need to succeed academically. While strides have been made, there is still work to ensure all students can access the accommodations they require. More than efforts are needed, and continued advocacy efforts are necessary.

### **The Role of Institutions**

Post-secondary institutions is crucial in ensuring accessibility for disabled students. They need to take proactive steps to identify and eliminate barriers to learning. For instance, they should consider the computer technology needs of these students (Fichten et al., 2006). Though only considering computer technology is not the only step, universities must also provide support and resources to all students with disabilities.

Institutional roles should also include accommodations such as alternative textbooks, visual language interpreters, and course-related material.

Additionally, universities should ensure disabled students receive the same quality education as their peers by setting appropriate expectations for learning outcomes. They need to be proactive in adapting courses to accommodate a range of learning styles and create an accessible environment through inclusive classroom features. Disabled academics should have the right to request class relocations if they are scheduled in an inaccessible room (Enabling Accessibility Guide, 2012).

Many students may feel overwhelmed by the work required to complete their degree and the long-term effects that a disability has on their academic journey, mainly in the face of the extra effort involved in advocating and disclosing their disabilities. To address this, institutions should provide training and guidance on the rights of disability accommodation. They should also include a statement in their course syllabi that outlines their commitment to providing disabled students with the necessary support services.

### **Potential Initiatives**

Institutions should consider implementing specific initiatives to improve accessibility. This could include developing work-integrated learning resources to support disabled students in becoming career-ready (Gatto et al., 2020). Furthermore, they should also work towards improving access to PSE and services for students with learning disabilities from the perspective of the students and alumni themselves (Reed et al., 2006).

## **How Students With Disabilities Advocate for Virtual or Hybrid Learning**

In today's digital age, it is more important than ever that students with disabilities have access to virtual or hybrid learning opportunities. These individuals often face unique challenges in traditional classroom environments, and virtual learning can provide much-needed accommodations that universities and colleges deny them. Still, they may need to advocate for their needs to ensure they get to provide support services that help disabled students navigate the digital spaces in which they will participate. Advocating may include providing technical assistance and additional training in the technology necessary for completing coursework or conducting research.

### **The Need for Virtual Access**

Students with disabilities may struggle with physical accessibility, sensory overload, or difficulty keeping pace with classroom lessons. The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted these issues, with many students needing help accessing the necessary accommodations. However, virtual learning can help alleviate many of these problems.

For example, online platforms can offer features like closed captions for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, adjustable reading speeds for those with learning disabilities, and flexible schedules for students with health-related limitations (Frandsen, 2023). Moreover, hybrid models allow students to enjoy the social benefits of in-person learning while benefiting from these accommodations.

Furthermore, with the rise of online courses, the Learning Disability Association of Canada estimates that one in ten people have learning disabilities (Disability Insider, 2021). Recognizing this, NEADS offers virtual mentoring and webinars on various topics related to accessibility. They continue collaborating and pushing schools, governments, and businesses to create a more inclusive learning environment.

**Self-Advocacy in Virtual Learning**

While virtual learning opportunities exist, students must actively advocate for their needs to benefit from them fully. Utilizing social media, blogs, and other forms of communication can be effective ways to educate and engage school officials and disability services. By sharing personal experiences and suggesting improvements, students can help shape more inclusive virtual learning environments (Government of Canada, 2021).

Joining disability-specific student organizations can also be beneficial. These groups, like NEADS, offer support, resources, and a sense of community (Saskatchewan Polytechnic, 2021). They can also provide discussion panels and focus group platforms, allowing students to share experiences, offer ideas, and build a stronger community. Furthermore, student-led groups nationwide, like the UVIC SSD and SDA, assist their members with navigating the post-secondary system and advocating for disability rights in their respective communities.

### **Virtual Resources**

There are several resources that students with disabilities can use to access virtual learning opportunities:

* **Special Needs Opportunity Window (SNOW)**: This offers news, resources, and online courses on special education, adaptive technologies, inclusive design, and web accessibility.
* **Saskatchewan Polytechnic's Virtual Learning Strategist Program**: This program is for clients with learning disabilities and essential skills gaps.
* **Virtual Learning Centre (VLC)**: VLC provides online learning opportunities powered by the latest technologies.
* **NEADS Webinars and Mentoring**: NEADS offers virtual mentoring and webinars on various topics related to accessibility.

Further virtual learning resources include technology and software options such as Google Classroom, Zoom, Google Drive, and Skype. Additionally, many universities now provide comprehensive online support, such as virtual student advisors and digital tutorial services, to help students with disabilities participate in virtual learning. If these options do not work separately, it is possible to create a comprehensive plan combining different resources to accommodate students with disabilities.

Nevertheless, further options exist, like creating designated learning spaces if students are homebound. Students must be able to carve out time to focus on their schoolwork. Other opportunities include:

* Create a dedicated space, even if it is small, exclusively for learning time. Avoid areas near windows, open doors, or any noisy spots whenever possible.
* Recommend that students facing attention challenges utilize swivel chairs, if accessible, to release excess energy. Additionally, fidget toys such as spinners can aid in maintaining focus during lessons.
* Text-to-speech tools can greatly benefit students, mainly when listening to video classes alongside their peers. Wearing headphones helps ensure a focused and immersive learning experience.

Virtual learning has the potential to open up new opportunities for those with disabilities by allowing for increased access to educational material and resources. However, these opportunities are only possible if students can learn at their own pace, which is often another challenge. It is essential to recognize the need for accessible course content and technology and provide adequate support systems for advocacy and success in PSE.

## **How Can Disabled Students Customize Their Coursework?**

While Canadian students with disabilities have options to customize their programs, the reality can be frustrating and less straightforward. With constantly changing policies and regulations that vary, there is much to consider when planning for PSE with disabilities. For those wishing to pursue higher education in Canada, student-led organizations provide accessibility support. These organizations strive to make universities more equipped for students with disabilities and to create a haven for them to access equal learning opportunities.

Students must have the support of their fellow peers to succeed in PSE. That is why student-led organizations focus on providing resources and tailored options that are available specifically for disabled students. Through these initiatives, disabled students can create a plan that works best for their individual needs.

Through technology and adaptive learning tools, students can access course materials in a way that is easier to digest and understand. This makes it possible for disabled students to successfully customize their educational path without compromising on the quality or content of the material. More direct approaches may be required to ensure the safety of disabled students.

### **Creating Milestones**

One of the ways that universities can accommodate students with disabilities is by using milestones. Milestones serve as manageable targets that break down larger academic goals into smaller, more achievable steps. This approach allows students to progress at their own pace, reducing the pressure and stress of traditional academic timelines.

### **Customizing Programs without Milestones:**

Not all academic accommodation needs to revolve around milestones. Some universities offer specialized workshops to support students with disabilities. These include additional tutoring, assistive technology, alternative testing arrangements, and more. Additionally, some universities allow students to complete projects and assignments that reflect their unique strengths and interests.

### **Finding Support**

Students with disabilities can also find support through various on-campus organizations and departments. York's Career Centre offers various services and events for students with disabilities. NEADS supports disabled students at the undergraduate, graduate, and college levels. Fortunately, there are many opportunities for funding available to students with disabilities.

### **Advocating for More Inclusive Standards**

Finally, students with disabilities can advocate for more inclusive academic standards. This could involve speaking to school officials about creating academic environments that do not expect every student to adhere to the same pace or rules. It might also mean pushing for policy changes that make academic work more sustainable for all students, not just those with disabilities.

There are multiple ways that students with disabilities in Canada can slow down or customize their undergraduate and graduate programs. From creating milestones and finding allies to advocating for more inclusive standards, these students have many tools to succeed in higher education. However, high-quality tools may be less effective when dealing with ableism, transphobia, and student life barriers.

## Addressing the Effects of Ableism, Transphobia, and Heterosexism in Post-Secondary Education

In Canada, post-secondary education is a significant stepping stone for individuals to achieve successful careers and contribute to society. However, students with disabilities or those identifying as transgender or non-heterosexual often face unique challenges due to ableism, transphobia, and heterosexism. These issues affect their educational experience, mental health, self-esteem, and well-being.

Ableism refers to discrimination and prejudice against individuals with disabilities, often manifesting as inaccessible facilities, lack of resources, and insensitivity. Transphobia and heterosexism involve prejudice against individuals based on their gender identity and sexual orientation, respectively. These forms of discrimination make it difficult for affected students to thrive in an educational setting and may even deter them from pursuing higher education.

Addressing these issues in PSE is critical. Firstly, it reinforces the principle of equal opportunity; regardless of their physical abilities, gender identities, or sexual orientations, they have the same chance to succeed. Secondly, it creates a more inclusive and diverse learning environment beneficial to all students by fostering empathy, respect, and understanding. Finally, it strongly conveys to society that discrimination is unacceptable (Government of Canada, 2020).

To address these issues effectively, Canadian post-secondary institutions must train faculty members in disability rights and awareness, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to support students with disabilities adequately. Schools should provide resources such as counselling services, assistive technologies, and peer support groups to help these students overcome their unique challenges.

Furthermore, universities must establish clear policies against ableism, transphobia, and heterosexism. A zero-tolerance policy for discrimination is necessary to protect students from bias and harassment. Students who experience such incidents should have access to resources like counselling, legal advice, and advocacy services.

Though in the past, zero-tolerance policies failed to accommodate students with disabilities. In fact, due to these students' emotional and behavioural disorders, paired with learning disabilities, they exhibited behaviours that led to their expulsion and suspension (Henson, 2012). The generic policies failed to address the needs of these students or provide them with the appropriate accommodations highlighting the importance of formulating such policies to consider their needs.

Today, however, student-led organizations are increasingly making PSE more equitable, attainable, and accessible. These groups focus on advocating for disability rights and providing resources such as peer mentorship programs, workshops, and financial assistance. Student advocacy efforts are also vital in making PSE more equitable and accessible.

Student-led organizations can provide resources and support to individuals with disabilities from marginalized backgrounds so that they can also participate in higher education. They can create awareness campaigns and organize events to spread awareness about the issues faced by these students using social media, garnering support from the larger community.

However, addressing these issues involves having the right policies and resources. It is also about creating a culture of inclusion where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered. The culture requires ongoing dialogue, education, and engagement among all university community members. Addressing the effects of ableism, transphobia, and heterosexism in PSE ensures that all students succeed and thrive.

## **How Student Life Barriers Affect Student Access to Quality PSE**

According to research, post-secondary students with disabilities in Canada face various barriers that affect their access to quality education opportunities. These barriers fall into three main categories: admissions, barriers within the education system, and lack of support at the post-secondary level (Jacobs, 2023). Physical, technological, systemic, financial, or attitudinal barriers can prevent these students from fully participating in their education.

For example, students may struggle to navigate post-secondary housing or access healthcare services. Additionally, finding part-time employment can be more challenging for students with disabilities, adding another difficulty to their student life (NEADS, 2018). These challenges can lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, further hindering students' academic performance (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2017).

During 2021-22, the ESDC's Supports for Student Learning Program (SSLP) commissioned seven research projects to gain deeper insights into the barriers and facilitators of educational attainment in Canada. Through these initiatives, they wanted to enhance the quality and clarity of our understanding in this crucial area. Each project’s external researcher’s study encompassed a comprehensive literature review, an examination of provincial and territorial programs and services, and the creation of a discussion paper. The research series aimed to achieve three primary objectives:

1. Develop a comprehensive knowledge and evidence base to enhance the SSLP's understanding of its diverse client groups, including gaining insights into their barriers.
2. The SSLP can effectively reach out to and collaborate with groups and organizations catering to specific communities or marginalized populations. This includes Black and racialized students, Indigenous students, 2SLGBTQI+ students, youth in care, anyone experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, or facing digital barriers.
3. To develop a direction for the SSLP, consider identifying priority streams that cater to specific population groups or projects targeting underserved students. Collaborating with partners with expertise in addressing specific barriers can also significantly contribute to the program's success.

## Key Findings From the Studies

Critical findings address the recurring barriers disabled post-secondary students face concerning access, accommodation, and inclusion. Their experiences often hinder students toward a PSE in K-12 public education. Specifically, biased perceptions of ability, practices like ability grouping and academic streaming, and exclusionary measures such as suspension are all linked to limited access to PSE.

When those with disabilities enroll in post-secondary education programs, they frequently encounter significant barriers that impede their access. Institutions attribute these barriers to accommodations, support services, and the physical environments of the institutions. The belief that marks and GPAs are the primary factors determining educational pathways rather than the academic or non-academic ones students choose is false. However, recent studies present evidence to the contrary, challenging this narrative.

There is an additional concern regarding the disproportionate streaming of students with disabilities, students from low-income families, Black, Latinx, Indigenous students, and English language learners into non-academic high school programs. This means they are diverted from pursuing PSE and, consequently, hindered from achieving improved lifelong socioeconomic outcomes.

Students with disabilities are nearly twice as likely as their peers without disabilities to face barriers in accessing PSE. However, by interpreting the data once we account for sociodemographic, programmatic, and school-based factors, the disparity in graduation rates across disability status becomes negligible, around just 1%. This suggests that much of the initial gap in graduation rates among students with disabilities is associated with the experiences they encounter within the public school system.

However, students without disabilities are nearly three times more likely to complete university. Furthermore, post-graduation, students with disabilities often face challenges in achieving income parity with their peers without disabilities. Regrettably, this study fails to support the notion that higher education has the potential to be the 'great equalizer' for students with disabilities.

After accounting for sociodemographic and school-related factors, the findings indicate that individuals with disabilities are more likely to reach income equality with their peers who do not have disabilities, but only if they do not attain PSE credentials. Regardless of disability status, the outcomes associated with PSE credentials do not seem to lead to future income equality, pointing to a persistent bias against individuals with disabilities in the workforce.

To combat this, universities and colleges must provide resources such as disability-related counseling and mental health services. Moreover, improved access to reasonable accommodations like assistive technology or physical modifications to campus buildings ensures that students with disabilities can fully participate in their education. To create an inclusive environment, institutions must raise awareness about disability rights among the student body.

Raising awareness involves running campaigns to educate students about the challenges their peers with disabilities face and how they can support them. Finally, providing food security, community care, funding support, book clubs, and peer support groups can help students with disabilities feel more included in the campus community (Burge, 2023). Significant barriers still exist for students with disabilities in Canada.

### **Solutions to Address Nationwide Shortcomings in Post-Graduate Education**

Addressing ableism in the education sector necessitates focused intervention at every level of study. Student-led organizations have been leading the way in creating inclusive pathways to ensure that students with disabilities have equal opportunities to graduate. They are pushing for more equitable and attainable learning opportunities through their advocacy efforts. As such, there are several recommendations for consideration:

### **Reconceptualizing Definitions and Responses**

The concept of disability concerning the public and PSE needs to be reimagined. There is a significant lack of consistency and coherence across the early years, K-12, and PSE sectors regarding understanding disability and the corresponding systems' response. (Parekh & Brown, 2020).

### **Recognizing Implications of PSE**

Recognizing that post-secondary access is an equity issue that has implications for students’ long-term benefits is essential. For those with disabilities, particularly intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), higher education is often overlooked or ignored in favour of direct services that address immediate needs. However, it has been shown that a college degree can dramatically improve outcomes for individuals with IDD (Lee & Taylor, 2021).

### **Improved Data Collection and Impact Measurement**

Implementing enhanced tracking and accountability measures for program access, and outcomes is crucial, particularly for students with disabilities throughout their K-12 and postsecondary journeys. This includes special education, academic pathways, and specialized programming.

### **Evidence-Based Tutoring**

Tutoring programs can help support student achievement, at least from the student's perspective (Micahel, 2016). Based on this research, effective tutoring program characteristics include having a robust connection to the school curriculum, offering frequent access, commitment to developing relationships between tutors and students, support and training for tutors, and ongoing formative assessments for students (Micahel, 2016).

Additionally, it is crucial to prioritize the support of high-dosage, community-based tutoring programs. Furthermore, establishing a well-coordinated infrastructure facilitates collaboration across various programs. The infrastructure can come from developing digital systems, which help streamline communication between tutors and other educational stakeholders.

### **Automatic Enrollment in Debt-Repayment Assistance**

Debt-repayment assistance plans should automatically enroll students and consider the structural ableism embedded in the workforce they will encounter once they leave school. These plans will provide greater financial security as they transition to employment. With additional support, students with disabilities will be more likely to pursue and complete postsecondary education.

### **Centralization of Information and Resources**

To ensure that students with disabilities can access and thrive in PSE, they often face the challenge of navigating multiple systems to secure funding, assessments, accommodations, and services. Unfortunately, these essential supports are fragmented across different organizations. Current research suggests that colleges must implement more targeted policies to enhance educational and employment outcomes for students with disabilities. Doing so creates a more inclusive and supportive environment for these individuals to excel academically and professionally (Bunbury, 2018; Dyer, 2018).

Meaningful collaboration between secondary schools and the adult disability community holds excellent potential for improving outcomes. Transitioning from high school to college and university can be challenging for any student and even more so for those with disabilities. To increase the likelihood of success, colleges and universities must establish clear policies regarding the documentation required to qualify for necessary services. Doing so can create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students (Dyer, 2018).

To enhance the provision of disability services on campuses, individuals must establish effective communication with nearby school districts. Effective communication will streamline the transfer of necessary documentation, thereby minimizing confusion surrounding qualification for disability services. Better coordination will benefit students, ensuring smoother processes and improved support.

The establishment of a centralized or federal system would be of immense value. Such a system would provide students with vital information regarding the resources available in their local area. Moreover, it would offer guidance on accessing support throughout their educational journey and facilitate a smooth transition into the workforce. Additionally, it would clarify the requirements for pursuing various funding and support opportunities.

By establishing this comprehensive resource, we ensure that students with disabilities have a more streamlined and accessible pathway to success in PSE.

## **Conclusion**

Across Canada and even globally, the enrollment of students with disabilities in colleges and universities is reaching unprecedented numbers. These students, much like their peers, aspire to achieve personal success and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Not long ago, this dream would have been deemed unattainable. However, it is becoming a reality for some students with disabilities, although they may require some assistance.

Achieving a barrier-free environment necessitates the involvement of all stakeholders. It is crucial that when high school students with disabilities graduate, their school establishes a seamless transfer of necessary documentation to their chosen college or university. By facilitating meetings between parents, students, and disability services prior to enrollment, we eliminate potential misunderstandings regarding access to accommodations.

Colleges and universities should enhance the understanding of disability personnel regarding individual disabilities, enabling the implementation of appropriate accommodations. There is a pressing need for additional training for personnel working in the office of disability across campuses. Moreover, university instructors should receive better training in supporting students with disabilities, ensuring they can deliver content fairly for all students.

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