

Article 1

Trends Report 2026

From classroom to career: Building better pathways for postsecondary graduates with disabilities



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The background of the slide is a photograph of a young woman with long dark hair and glasses, sitting at a desk in an office or classroom setting. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. A mug is on the desk in front of her. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark purple filter.

Moving from education into a career is a defining life transition. It is the moment when years of learning and planning meet the possibilities – and realities – of the labour market. This period can be full of excitement, but also pressure and uncertainty.

Introduction

Education and early work experiences influence not just a graduate's first job, but also their long-term career trajectories and satisfaction. For many graduates, this period also brings a realization: employment opportunities are not equally accessible to everyone.

College and university have historically been seen as pathways to rewarding careers. University education, in particular, tends to predict higher earnings,¹ and is generally assumed to provide job security and in-demand skills. Higher education also has value beyond employability, including opportunities for personal growth and building friendships. But the labour market is changing, and along with it, so are employment outcomes for postsecondary-educated workers.

The benefits of higher education have never been shared equally. Even though more people with disabilities are attaining college and university credentials than ever before, they still have worse employment outcomes than their peers. Inaccessible environments and ableist stigma from educators, peers, and employers can limit their access to career development opportunities and professional networks.^{2,3}

Students and graduates with disabilities have the power to direct their career pathways and their professional development. Colleges and universities can also help close this gap by better supporting students with disabilities as they prepare for the workforce. By making career development more accessible, institutions can equip graduates with disabilities with the tools to navigate the rapidly changing labour market.

In this report, we discuss the current state of labour market outcomes for new graduates with disabilities. Young adults and early career workers will find practical advice for career planning, including making the best use of available resources and how to navigate the shift from school to the workforce. Professionals and practitioners in higher education – especially in career services, work-integrated learning, or academic counseling – will find recommendations for supporting students with disabilities in their career preparations, including developing cross-sectoral partnerships with community organizations and employers, as well as building employer and institutional capacity for disability inclusion.

Entering a Changing Labour Market

Young adults in Canada have faced an increasingly challenging labour market. Over the past decade, employment participation for the demographic aged 15-24 has fluctuated from relatively low unemployment rates in 2015-2019, record lows in 2020 and 2021, and an unstable recovery since 2022.⁴ For new college and university graduates – most of whom are in their twenties⁵ – the labour market looks unpredictable and hard to navigate.

The labour market also looks more and more competitive. The number of new graduates reached all-time highs in 2025, increasing the supply of postsecondary-educated workers.^{6,7} Leaner staffing models and diminishing entry-level roles⁸ mean mid-level and senior professionals are often competing with younger workers for the same positions.⁹ What employers are looking for is changing, too. Once ubiquitous advice like learning to code now feels disconnected from reality, as employers increasingly rely on Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to write code and conduct basic testing,^{10,11} and the growth of AI is increasing demand for both AI-specific skills and people skills.¹²

DRIVERS OF LABOUR MARKET UNCERTAINTY

Geopolitical, social, economic, and environmental events within the last 5-10 years have all contributed to the difficult labour market. The impacts of COVID-19, military conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, US trade restrictions, and escalating climate-related events – to name only a few factors – have created widespread uncertainty in Canada and around the world.

The Bank of Canada describes the current labour situation as “low-hire, low-fire”: businesses are not necessarily laying off a lot of workers, but nor are they hiring many.¹³ Turnover rates are low while unemployment has increased. This trend is particularly challenging for unemployed young workers. In the face of uncertainty, employers often postpone hiring and become more motivated to retain experienced workers. In fact, employment rates for workers 55 years and older have increased since 2022, while they’ve declined for young people.¹³ This issue and other labour market challenges impact workers with disabilities as well, intensifying the existing barriers discussed in the following sections. For example, in CCRW’s research with Deaf and Hard of Hearing workers, we found that younger Deaf workers had more difficulty finding employment than older Deaf workers.¹⁴

AI, as mentioned above, merits special attention. In June 2026, the Government of Canada released the AI for All strategy, including a target to “create 250,000 new AI-related jobs over the next five years” and “increase AI adoption from just over 12% to 60% by 2034”.¹⁵ While the full impact of AI on the workforce is still uncertain, its effects are already unavoidable.

For one, the use of AI in recruitment and hiring has changed the dynamics of searching for work. Recruitment has less human involvement than ever, as employers use AI tools to review, screen, and filter out applications before they ever reach human eyes. In turn, many job seekers are also using AI to optimize their applications. The adoption of AI has also changed employers’ expectations. Basic AI skills are now a common expectation,¹⁶ but so are the ‘soft skills’ that AI still cannot replicate, like critical thinking and creativity.¹⁷

AI could be impacting job availability. Emerging research suggests implementing AI tools leads to “workload creep”: fewer employees are made responsible for greater workloads and wider job scopes.¹⁸ This, in turn, could lead to employers reducing headcount. Research is still ongoing to better understand how AI is affecting job availability, as well as job quality, in Canada.¹⁹ Demand for specific occupations considered “highly exposed” has declined in the past 4 years and remains low, including jobs in sales, marketing and content creation, and tech.²⁰ However, it is not clear yet that AI has caused a widespread decline in opportunities.

This uncertainty may be one of the biggest challenges. Students and graduates rightfully want to know how AI could impact their fields and what skills they need in order to stay competitive. However, AI is evolving faster than postsecondary curricula can adapt. While schools strive to structure their programs to match future workforce needs, students and graduates may also benefit from building practical AI-related skills outside the classroom.

The challenges experienced by young adults are compounded for those with disabilities. All early career workers face tough competition and shifting employer expectations, but workers with disabilities must also navigate interpersonal discrimination and deeply entrenched institutional barriers.



Employment Gaps After Graduation

More young people than ever are entering the working world while living with a disability. Disability rates among those aged 15-24 increased seven percentage points between 2017 and 2022, driven especially by a rise in mental health disabilities.²¹ Because most college and university graduates are young adults,⁵ it is increasingly important to understand the barriers faced by graduates with disabilities entering the labour market.

In general, youth with disabilities have worse employment outcomes than their peers without disabilities. The employment gap between youth with and without disabilities has fluctuated from about 2% in 1986*, to 11% in 2006, to about 9% currently.²² The employment gap is narrower for those with postsecondary credentials, but graduates with disabilities are still less likely to be employed than their peers without disabilities.²³ Moreover, not all graduates with disabilities face the same kinds of barriers. For example, data from 2017 showed that less than a third of university graduates with the most severe disability-related barriers were employed.²⁴ Postsecondary-educated workers with disabilities are also frequently under-utilized in their roles. One study found they are 15% more likely to say they are overqualified for the work they do.²⁵ This means that not only are fewer opportunities available for graduates with disabilities, but also that their education, skills, and talents are underrecognized.

From 2023 to 2026, CCRW carried out the Accessibility Standards Canada (ASC)-funded [SURF project](#) to learn more about what postsecondary graduates with disabilities experience when they leave school and enter the workforce. Below, drawing on findings from SURF, as well as an analysis of data from the 2023 National Graduates Survey (NGS) – which collected data in 2022 from persons who graduated in 2020 – we discuss how and why finding work after graduation differs for graduates with disabilities.

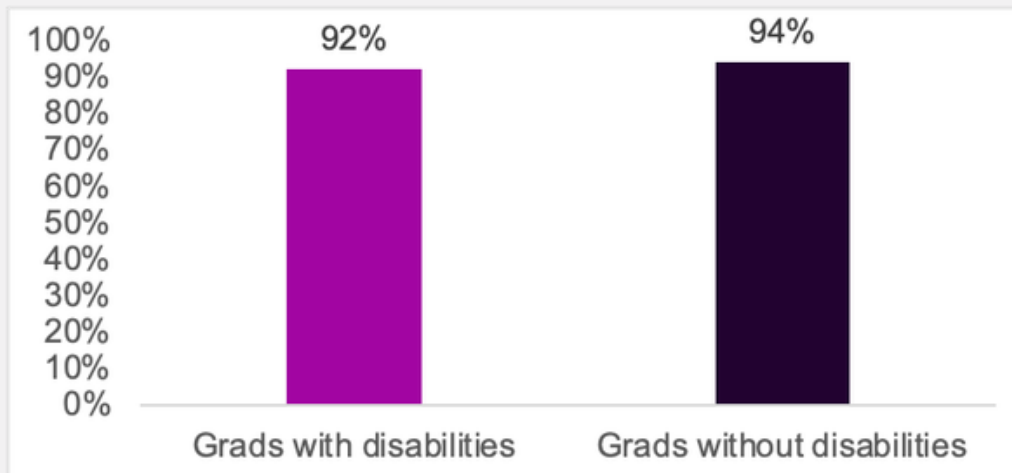
* Because early data collection tools likely excluded many youth with disabilities, especially mental health-related disabilities, the employment gap in 1986 may in fact have been larger.

FINDING EMPLOYMENT

First, the good news: two years after graduation, most college and university graduates are in the labour force and employed.²³

However, data from the NGS showed that outcomes were not the same for graduates with and without disabilities. There were still nearly one in ten (9%) graduates with disabilities not in the labour force, compared to 6% of graduates without disabilities. And among those in the labour force, there was still a 2% employment gap between those with and without disabilities.

Percent of graduates in labour force who were employed, two years after graduation²³



Statistics Canada (2023) †

Although this gap appears small, it masks how the road to employment is much bumpier for those with disabilities. It also does not tell us about discrepancies in work quality, like differences in contract type, working hours, and salary.

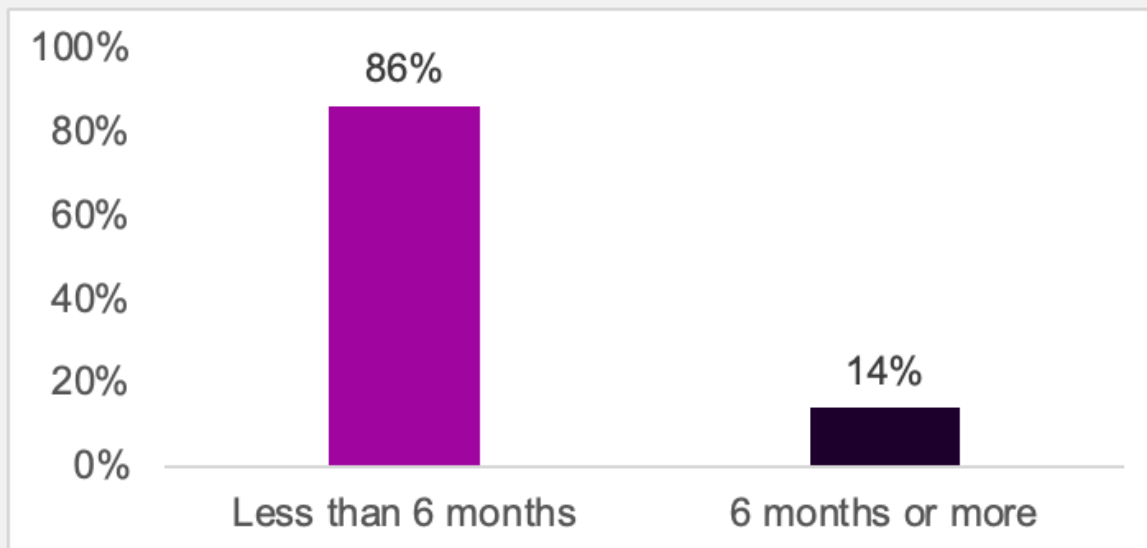
† Note: The findings presented here represent the views of the authors. This does not constitute an endorsement by Statistics Canada of this product. All data are reproduced and distributed on an “as is” basis with the permission of Statistics Canada.

HOW LONG IT TAKES TO FIND A JOB

Recent graduates who took part in CCRW's Sourcing Understanding Through Research for Future Talent (SURF) research project – a three-year ASC-funded initiative that followed the postsecondary-to-work transitions of people with disabilities – found that, in many ways, reality did not line up with their expectations.²⁶ Job searches took longer than anticipated, and quite a few graduates struggled to secure permanent, full-time employment. Many were stressed and anxious about the school-to-work transition, and frequently felt unprepared for next steps.

Out of nearly 300 college and university students with disabilities we surveyed as part of SURF, very few (about one in seven) expected their post-graduation job search to take at least six months. In reality, data from the NGS showed that one in three graduates experiences a prolonged job search of six months or more.

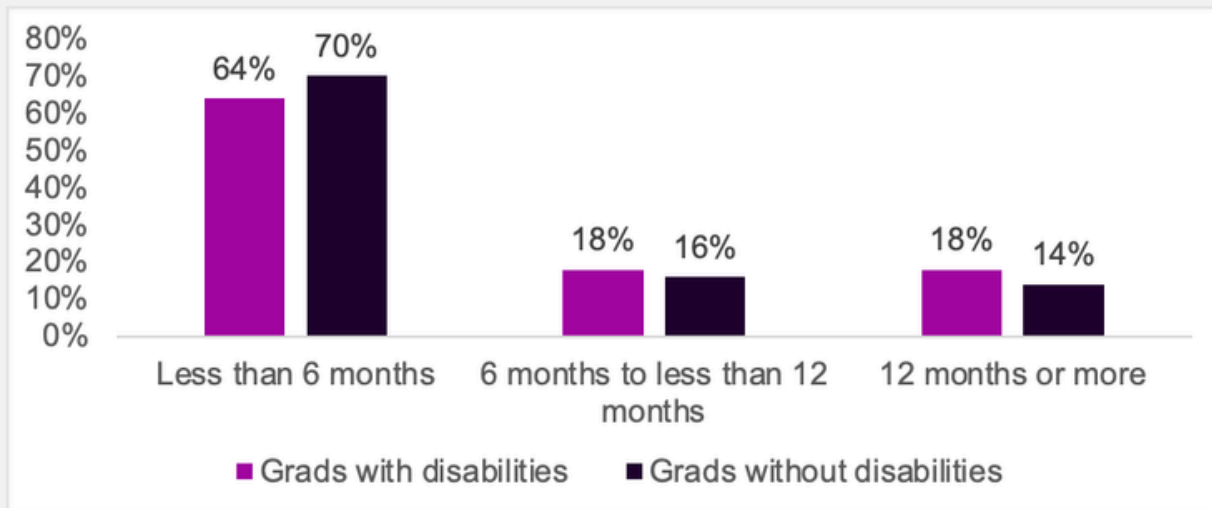
How long students with disabilities expected it would take to find a job²⁶



CCRW

In comparison, graduates without disabilities spend less time on average searching for work. They are comparatively more likely to secure work within six months, and less likely to take 6-12 months, or one year or more.

Length of job search after graduating²³



Statistics Canada (2023)‡

Note: Excludes those already working prior to graduation.

JOB QUALITY

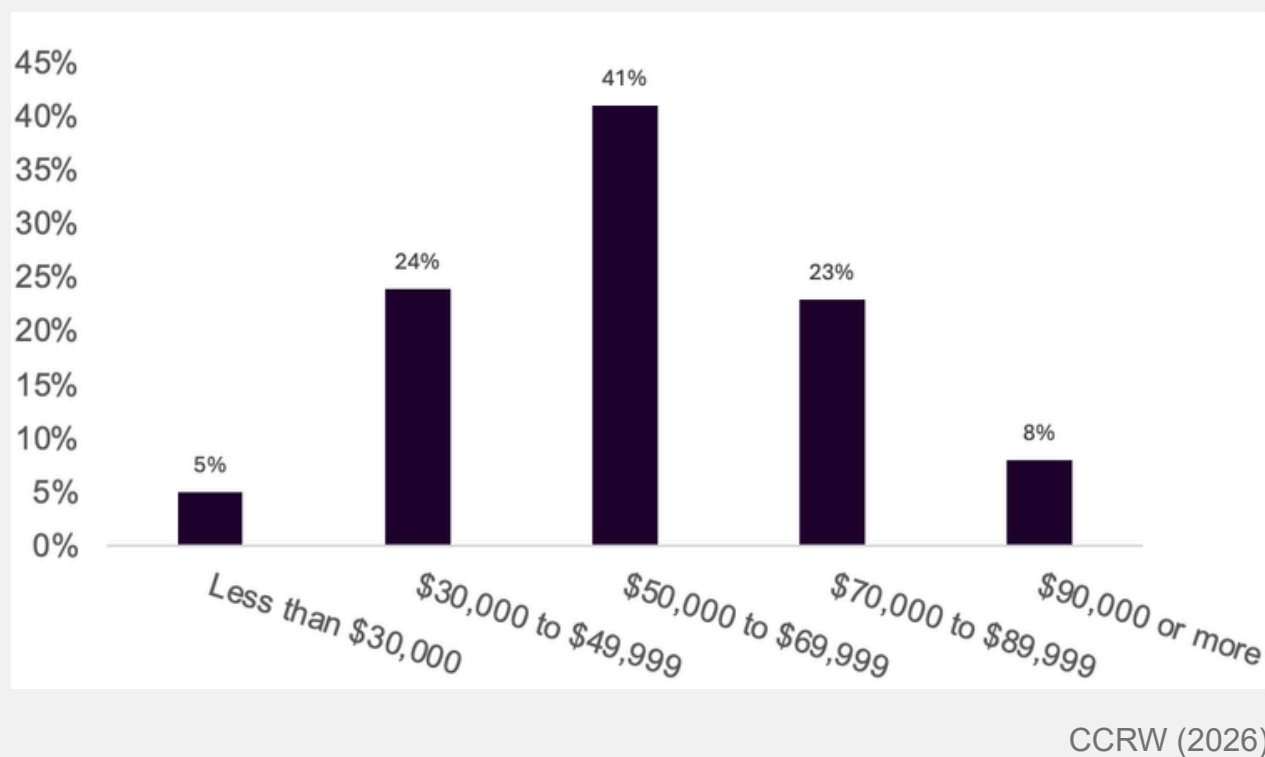
Graduates with disabilities are less likely to work in full time, permanent roles. On average, they also earn lower wages or salaries and are less satisfied with their employment.

Of those employed two years post-graduation, 14% of grads with disabilities worked part-time, compared to 10% of those without disabilities.²³ One in five (20%) held a temporary or contract-based role instead of a permanent position, compared to 16% of their peers without disabilities.²³

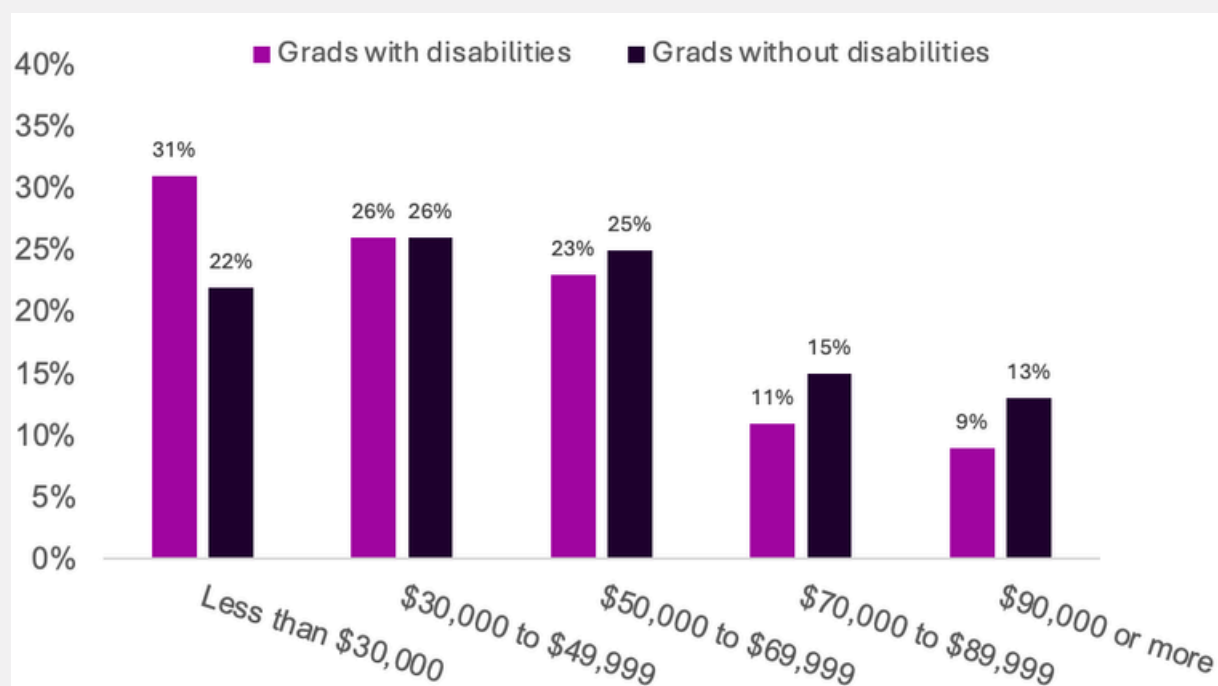
‡ Note: The findings presented here represent the views of the authors. This does not constitute an endorsement by Statistics Canada of this product. All data are reproduced and distributed on an “as is” basis with the permission of Statistics Canada.

The median employment income for core working-age adults in Canada (i.e., individual workers aged 25-54) is about \$58,000.²⁷ Most participants in CCRW's SURF project expected to earn a salary roughly in line with the median. Very few anticipated that their salaries would be below \$30,000, or above \$90,000.

Expected salaries of college and university students with disabilities in their first job²⁶



In reality, the NGS found that nearly one in three graduates with disabilities – and nearly one in four without disabilities – had an income below \$30,000 two years post-graduation. In the vast majority of regions across Canada, \$30,000 scarcely exceeds the Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO)²⁸ for a single adult, meaning many people with and without disabilities are not able to pay for the basic necessities of life without additional support. In cities with populations of more than 500,000, the LICO is \$31,264.

Income of college and university graduates, two years after graduating²³

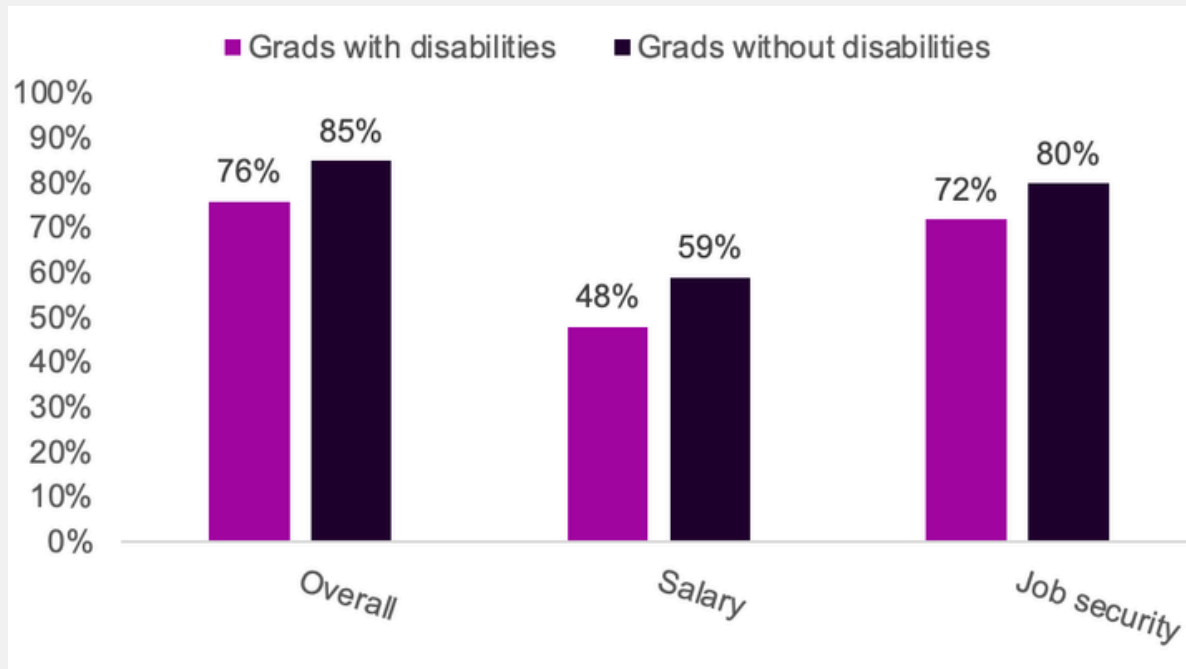
Statistics Canada (2023) §

Graduates with disabilities were also less likely than their peers without disabilities to earn high incomes. Only one in five (20%) graduates with disabilities was earning \$70,000 or more, compared to 28% of graduates without disabilities.

Unsurprisingly, graduates with disabilities were also less likely to be satisfied with their salary – fewer than half (48%), compared to 59% of those without disabilities. They were also less satisfied with their job security and their employment overall.

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Percent of college and university graduates who were satisfied with their employment, two years after graduating²³



Statistics Canada (2023) **

Note: Shows percent of respondents who selected either “very satisfied” or “satisfied”.

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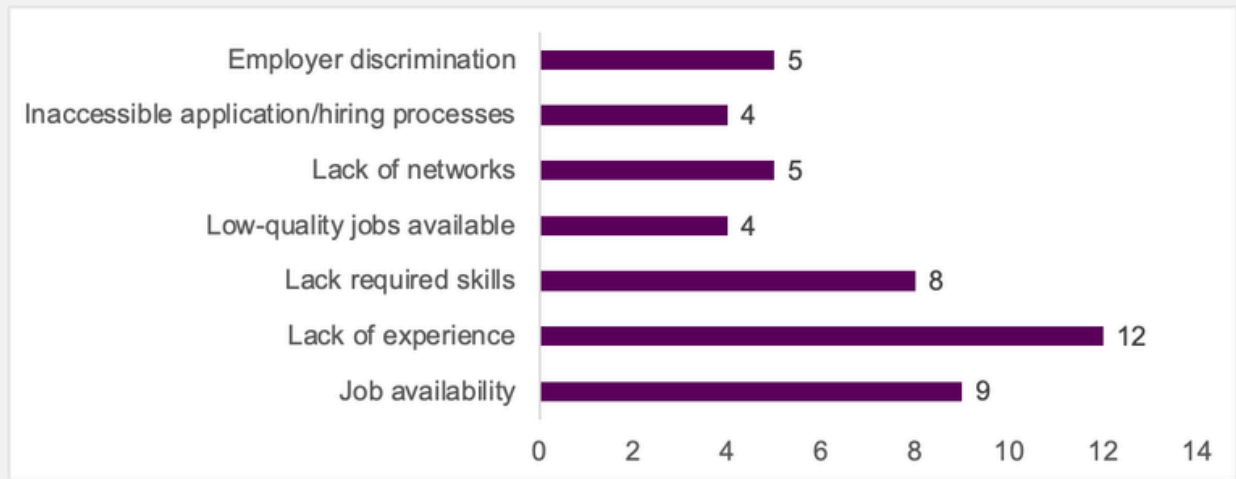
Barriers on the Path Into the Workforce

As the evidence above illustrates, there is more to employment equity than labour force status. Achieving workforce inclusion means grappling with prolonged job search timelines, quality of work, and much more.

Real labour market equity is measured by more than the employment rate. Between 2025 and 2028, CCRW is leading the Roadmap to Inclusion project, an ASC-funded research initiative that will help us better understand, measure, and harmonize workforce inclusion indicators in Canada and across the G7. To learn more, visit CCRW's research page at www.ccrw.org/research.

Findings from the SURF project provide context for national employment statistics, illuminating some of the contributing factors to these gaps and suggesting opportunities for change.

Forty-two participants in SURF completed a follow-up survey about a year after the first questionnaire. By this point, most participants had graduated, and some had found employment. Researchers at CCRW asked these early-career workers what they felt were the biggest barriers facing job seekers with disabilities. Lack of work experience and/or required skills were major barriers reported by many; so was low job availability. Participants also reported employer discrimination, lack of professional networks, and inaccessible application and hiring processes as barriers to finding work.

Barriers faced by new graduates with disabilities in the search for work²⁶

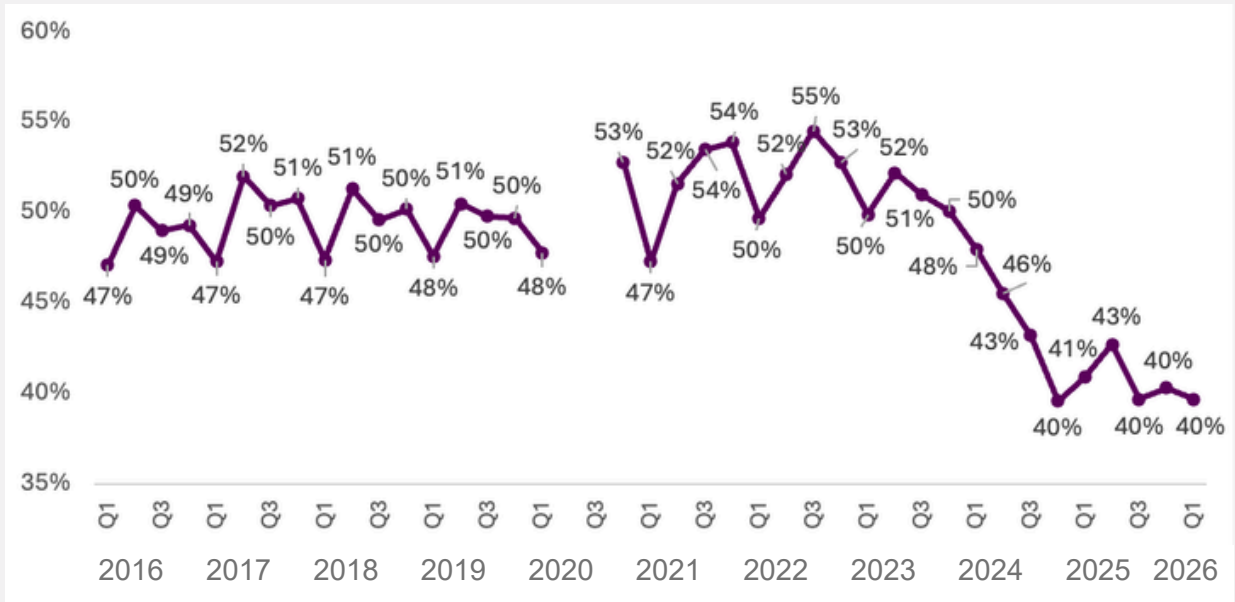
CCRW (2026)

THE DECLINE OF ENTRY LEVEL JOBS

Over one-third (12; 34%) of the graduates who took part in the SURF project said job opportunities required more experience than they had.

Many journalists and other commentators have suggested that entry level jobs – positions requiring little or no experience – are vanishing.^{29,30} Over the past three years, this observation has been highly accurate. From 2016 until 2023, about half of all job vacancies were entry level.³¹ Since then, the availability of these roles has declined drastically. In Q1 of 2026, only 40% of vacancies were entry level.

Proportion of job postings requiring less than one year of experience, 2016-2026.³¹



Statistics Canada (2026)^{††}

Note: No data were collected for the Job Vacancy and Wage Survey in Q2 and Q3 2020.

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University graduates face an additional challenge: fewer jobs require a university education, compared to the number of new degree-holders. Between 2015 and 2025, the proportion of core working-age (25-64) people in Canada with a bachelor's degree increased from one in five (20%) to one in four (25%), and the proportion with a graduate degree increased from less than one in ten (9%) to about one in seven (14%).³² Jobs requiring university credentials have not increased at the same rate. In 2016, about 11% of jobs required a bachelor's degree, and 2% required postgraduate credentials; in 2026, the rates were 14% and 3%, respectively.³¹ In short, new postsecondary graduates are facing a real scarcity of roles that suit their education, skills, and experience.

This job scarcity is an issue for all graduates, but outcomes remain worse for those with disabilities. This is true even though employed postsecondary graduates with disabilities are slightly more likely than those without disabilities to meet or exceed their job's educational requirements (94% versus 92%, respectively).²³ In other words, it is not the type, or level, of postsecondary education held by workers with disabilities that is driving this issue. Faced with tough competition for entry level roles, applicants frequently must demonstrate more than a degree to appeal to employers. Some of the challenges graduates with disabilities encounter stem from barriers accessing other career development experiences.

BARRIERS TO EARLY WORK EXPERIENCES AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Early work experiences contribute to future career success. Opportunities like volunteering, co-op placements, internships, and other work-integrated learning can set applicants apart when their formal work and educational backgrounds are otherwise equivalent. This is because, first, early work experiences provide crucial skills, networking opportunities, and opportunities for career exploration. Second, employers actively look for evidence of early work experience, even for entry level roles.³³

Beginning in secondary or sometimes primary school, youth with disabilities face barriers to accessing early work experiences, creating downstream effects on employability. There are numerous reasons for this: lack of school funding can impact the availability of career preparation resources like counseling, pre-apprenticeships, and co-ops;³⁴ career counselors are not always trained to support students with disabilities;³⁵ employers can be reluctant to take on a student with a disability;³⁵ and physical, digital, or interpersonal barriers may prevent students from accessing career resources entirely.³⁶

More about these barriers, their causes, and recommendations for change can be found in CCRW's paper on promoting employment participation for youth with disabilities by Renaud et al.³⁷

Ideally, these gaps would be remedied so that children and adolescents with disabilities never fall behind their peers in the first place. However, postsecondary institutions, as centres of both learning and workforce preparation, should also be equipped to provide accessible and disability-informed resources that help level the playing field. We learned from the students interviewed in the SURF project that postsecondary career resources do not always meet these needs.²⁶ Students' opinions were mixed, but more often negative, regarding the quality, accessibility, and usefulness of these resources. College and university career services can help address gaps in early work experiences and skill development opportunities, provide pathways to community resources, and offer centralized job search resources – but more attention is needed to accessibility and cross-sector coordination, as we discuss below in the section **Changing the postsecondary-to-work landscape.**

STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Attitudinal barriers – those resulting from how people think and believe – are some of the toughest to fix. Research has shown that the biggest reasons employers are unwilling to hire people with disabilities are misconceptions about capability, competence, and how much it will cost to provide accommodations.³⁸

Unsurprisingly, several SURF participants said employer discrimination was a major challenge. Employer biases may be a particularly large barrier for young adults, because the presence of disability conflicts with widely held assumptions about young people's health.³⁹ These misconceptions can lead to people failing to recognize, or dismissing, the needs of younger workers with disabilities.

Additionally, members of other marginalized groups – whether by gender, sexual identity, race and/or ethnicity, Indigeneity, or any other factor – can face intersecting discrimination: experiencing the effects of more than one kind of stigma at the same time. For example, graduates with disabilities who are members of a visible minority group are less likely to be employed two years post-graduation, compared to white graduates with disabilities.²³



Students and Grads: Planning Your Path From School to Work

In the section below, we offer suggestions for postsecondary students and recent graduates with disabilities on navigating the postsecondary and school-to-work landscape, finding and using resources, and maximizing their career potential. These recommendations build upon what we learned from students and graduates who took part in SURF, as well as CCRW's decades of direct experience supporting young adults with disabilities.

LOOK AT ALL THE POSSIBILITIES

The most important thing to know may be this: there are even more career paths available to you than you think.

The first task in career planning is exploring your options. However, sometimes people's expectations and assumptions limit the career options they consider. For example, young people who grew up in highly educated households may feel they must attend university. For someone with no family history of postsecondary education, they may feel the opposite – that attending university is impossible. Family expectations can also be very direct: some people are pressured to pursue medicine, law, or other occupations viewed as lucrative and prestigious; others are expected to take over a family business. Sometimes, people with disabilities can even start to absorb negative messages about disability, and wrongly believe that certain jobs are off-limits to them. The skilled trades, for example, have historically excluded those who don't fit the traditional image of a tradesperson – typically a white, able-bodied man – although this is beginning to change.⁴⁰

At its most basic, career planning means finding out what you want to do, what you are good at, and where you can be paid for doing it. In all likelihood, there are a wide variety of careers that fit these criteria. In addition, most people's career paths are not linear – meaning the skills and knowledge gained in a postsecondary program can be applied to many occupations.⁴¹ Some of these occupations might not even exist yet, just as many jobs today did not exist 10-20 years ago, like AI governance specialists,⁴² social media managers,⁴³ and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) analysts.⁴⁴

Your program of study does not limit you to working in one line of work. So, to begin with, be curious: learn about many fields, industries, and jobs. Talk to a variety of people working in different roles, and ask them what they like about their work or how they ended up there. For those currently enrolled in a postsecondary program, you may be pleasantly surprised to learn how many possibilities there are with your future diploma or degree. For example, someone with a bachelor's degree in psychology may not necessarily pursue graduate school and become a psychologist; they may decide to work as a policy analyst, an HR professional, a social services worker, a peer support coordinator, a user experience (UX) researcher, or any number of other roles that require skills in social science, statistics, communication, and critical thinking.

USE ALL THE RESOURCES AT YOUR DISPOSAL

Many career assessment and planning tools are available through community service providers, your school's career services office, and online. For current students, find out what is available at your institution. Often, career services can help you explore different options related to your program, review your application materials, and prepare for interviews. If you are in the exploration phase, they may have career values assessments or other tools to assist you. If you are looking for work, they may host job boards for internal roles and/or entry level opportunities in the open labour market. **Other resources to consider include the following examples on the next page:**





SCHOOL ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

They may be able to guide you on how your disability-related needs intersect with your career planning journey, prepare for conversations about workplace accommodations, or connect you with community resources.



WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING (WIL) OFFICES

Some colleges and universities – or individual departments – have a separate WIL office for formal work-integrated learning placements like practicums and co-ops, while the career services office provides more general career advising and job search support. Your school's WIL may be able to share guidance on work-learn placements connected to your program, or help you make connections with employers in their network.



GOVERNMENT CAREER TOOLS (ONLINE)

The Government of Canada's Job Bank has career planning resources including a career aptitude self-assessment; career interests quizzes; skill assessment tools; and job profiles with information on requirements, tasks, salary ranges, and supply-demand outlook by region. You can access the Government of Canada's career planning resources here:

<https://www.jobbank.gc.ca/career-planning>



COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Employment service providers and disability organizations in your community can assist you in your job search. There are many such organizations across Canada; an online search can help you find local resources. CCRW has 11 offices nationwide – to learn more about what we do, and if there is a CCRW office near you, visit our website:

<https://ccrw.org/employment-services/job-seekers-and-workers/>.



ALUMNI NETWORKS & MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Many universities and colleges maintain alumni networks: communities of people who graduated from the same school or department. These networks may host professional events, or serve as a way to connect students with alumni for informational interviews and even referral opportunities.

Mentorship programs are formal systems matching career mentors with mentees. Mentors can be an invaluable asset for all early career job seekers, especially persons with disabilities. Informal mentors – like a former professor, supervisor, or more experienced peer – can be just as valuable. Finding a mentor is an excellent way to strengthen your support network.

BUILD A SUPPORT NETWORK

Along with being open to possibility, the other most important thing to know is that you are not alone in your journey.

When we shared SURF findings to a group of interested graduates and other members of the disability community, what resonated most with the attendees was learning how many other people were navigating the same bumpy landscape. Financial strain, feeling ‘behind’ or delayed compared to their peers, and dealing with the discouragement of rejection were common challenges. Finding community can help you face these hurdles with resilience. You might connect with others with similar lived experiences through student-led disability groups, through friends and family, or online.

As mentioned above, the significance of a mentor cannot be overstated. A mentor isn’t always someone you met through a structured program (although they can be). In either case, mentors provide advice, emotional support, and encouragement. They can help build personal and professional networks that are crucial to long term career success. They can also help you make more effective career planning decisions, or give advice on how to build a compelling professional website or LinkedIn profile.

One of the most uniquely valuable kinds of mentor is someone with similar lived experience. A career mentor with a disability, or who has faced similar barriers, can be a role model and advisor about how to navigate shared challenges. For example, many early career workers find it stressful adapting to the ‘hidden curriculum’ of the workplace: the unwritten norms, rules, and expectations passed on through informal interactions. This includes things like workplace etiquette and culture (e.g., how much small talk people make, or how casually they dress); power dynamics (e.g., who makes decisions and holds influence, regardless of job title); and how to ‘manage up’ (e.g., understanding and navigating your supervisor’s communication style and priorities). Figuring out the hidden curriculum can be especially anxiety-inducing for many neurodivergent people and those with some types of mental health disabilities. A mentor who has gone through this themselves, and learned from it, can be a powerful ally.

Mentors can also help grow your knowledge about your employment rights, and build your confidence in advocating for them.



BE YOUR OWN BIGGEST ADVOCATE

Self-advocacy is the ability to recognize and communicate your needs, interests, and rights. Students may advocate for themselves at school, with the support of accessibility services, to request accommodations and navigate support systems. Self-advocacy skills become even more important in the workforce, where employers may not have the same formal systems as postsecondary institutions to guide the accommodation process or advocate on your behalf.

Disclosing a disability or requesting accommodations from an employer is a complex, dynamic, and deeply personal decision. Some people do not have the option to withhold their disability status because their condition is visible to others. For others, like those with mental health, learning, and many types of medical disabilities, the decision to disclose can feel risky. In fact, one out of every two workers with a mental health disability who does not request a workplace accommodation makes this choice because they fear negative outcomes, like discrimination.⁴⁵

Self-advocacy skills are not often taught in school, and experiencing discrimination can discourage youth with disabilities from advocating for themselves. Below is some guidance to point you in the right direction if you are a young person and/or recent graduate trying to build these skills.

First, disclosing a disability and requesting accommodations are not the same thing. You are not required to disclose your medical history to an employer. However, you may decide to disclose your disability in the process of requesting accommodations, or for any other reason, such as seeking understanding and support. Employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations, and they may request supporting documentation about your situation, but there are legal limits to the amount of medical information they can ask for. It is strongly recommended that everyone, especially workers with disabilities, familiarize themselves with the legal protections that apply to workers in their province and Canada broadly. Knowing this information beforehand will make you feel more confident and prepared.

Here are some other things to consider if you are thinking about disclosing a disability or requesting workplace accommodations:

CLARIFY YOUR ‘WHY’

Identify whether you need an accommodation (e.g., for an interview; throughout your job duties) to perform at your best. Requesting an accommodation so you can do your best work may be your main, or only, goal. Or, you may have other goals around disclosure. For example, you may be seeking greater awareness and understanding from coworkers or your supervisor.

CONSIDER ‘WHAT’, ‘WHEN’, AND ‘WHO’

Disclosure is dynamic because it can happen at different stages of employment, or with some people but not others. There is no single ‘best’ time to disclose a disability or request an accommodation. Many workers with disabilities approach disclosure strategically – that is, they choose to disclose, or request an accommodation, when they feel the benefits of doing so outweigh the perceived risks. No one but the person with the disability can make that decision. Also, disclosing a disability to one person or party (e.g., the HR department) does not mean you are obligated to tell others, like your coworkers.

BE THOROUGH ABOUT ‘HOW’.



If you request workplace accommodations, it is wise to document the process. Keep your own written records of requests, conversations, and responses. If and when accommodations are agreed upon, you should also get this in writing.



If you are still a student, accessibility services can advise you on the process of requesting accommodations. If you have graduated, community organizations like CCRW can assist you as well. In the workplace, employee resource groups (ERGs), if your organization has one, can also help. ERGs are voluntary, employee-led groups formed around shared experiences, such as disability, that provide personal and professional support.



Learning how to advocate for yourself can be intimidating. It's normal not to feel confident having these conversations right away. Practice and critical reflection can help. For example, you can try rehearsing scenarios with a trusted peer, family member, or mentor, and ask them for feedback. Some employment services providers now also offer digital tools like Virtual Reality (VR) sessions for building self-advocacy skills. You can learn more about CCRW's VR sessions for job seekers here: <https://ccrw.org/virtualreality/>

Changing the Postsecondary-to-Work Landscape

In this section, we suggest three priority areas for improving the postsecondary-to-work transition for people with disabilities.

STRENGTHEN THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN POSTSECONDARY SCHOOLS

Colleges and universities are struggling to meet the needs of students with disabilities. As rates of disability rise among young adults,²¹ demand for accommodations and disability services has increased, but funding and infrastructure for these services have not kept up. Addressing this will require greater investment in disability services.⁴⁶ As reported by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, it is the responsibility of the provincial government to provide adequate funding to support this need.⁴⁷

Accessibility and disability inclusion must also be integrated into career services, rather than relegated to accessibility services offices. Findings from SURF²⁶ and other research⁴⁸ have shown that these supports vary in quality and are not always well-advertised.

Postsecondary institutions can strengthen career services by promoting early, proactive career planning across programs and making sure students know what resources are available. They should also invest in training, education, and capacity-building for career services staff to provide disability-informed support. In addition, institutions can help build stronger peer networks for disability communities on campus, including disability-led student groups, while applying inclusive design principles to career development programs, skills training, and other career resources so accessibility and inclusion are built in from the start.

FOSTER DISABILITY CONFIDENCE IN EMPLOYERS

Employers do not always realize the ways barriers in their recruitment, hiring, and work environments can exclude applicants with disabilities, and so they are left unaware of how many qualified students and early career workers are in their talent pipelines.

Work-learn opportunities for students are created through strong partnerships between employers and postsecondary institutions. Career services and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) thus have a role to play in facilitating equitable opportunities for students with disabilities.

Ideally, dedicated funding streams should be established for accessible internships, co-ops, practicums, and other work-learn opportunities. WIL offices and career services can identify suitable placements with disability inclusive employers, help prepare students, and ensure accessibility is considered before, during, and after the placement. Key to this approach is providing employer education and training on disability inclusion, with an emphasis on addressing bias and discrimination. This can be provided by the institution, or in collaboration with disability community organizations.

COLLABORATE ACROSS SECTORS TO CREATE SMOOTHER PATHWAYS

Implementing these recommendations requires shared responsibility across governments, postsecondary institutions, employers, and community organizations. Strong cross-sectoral collaboration ensures students and new graduates do not fall through the cracks when moving into work-learn placements or the open labour market.

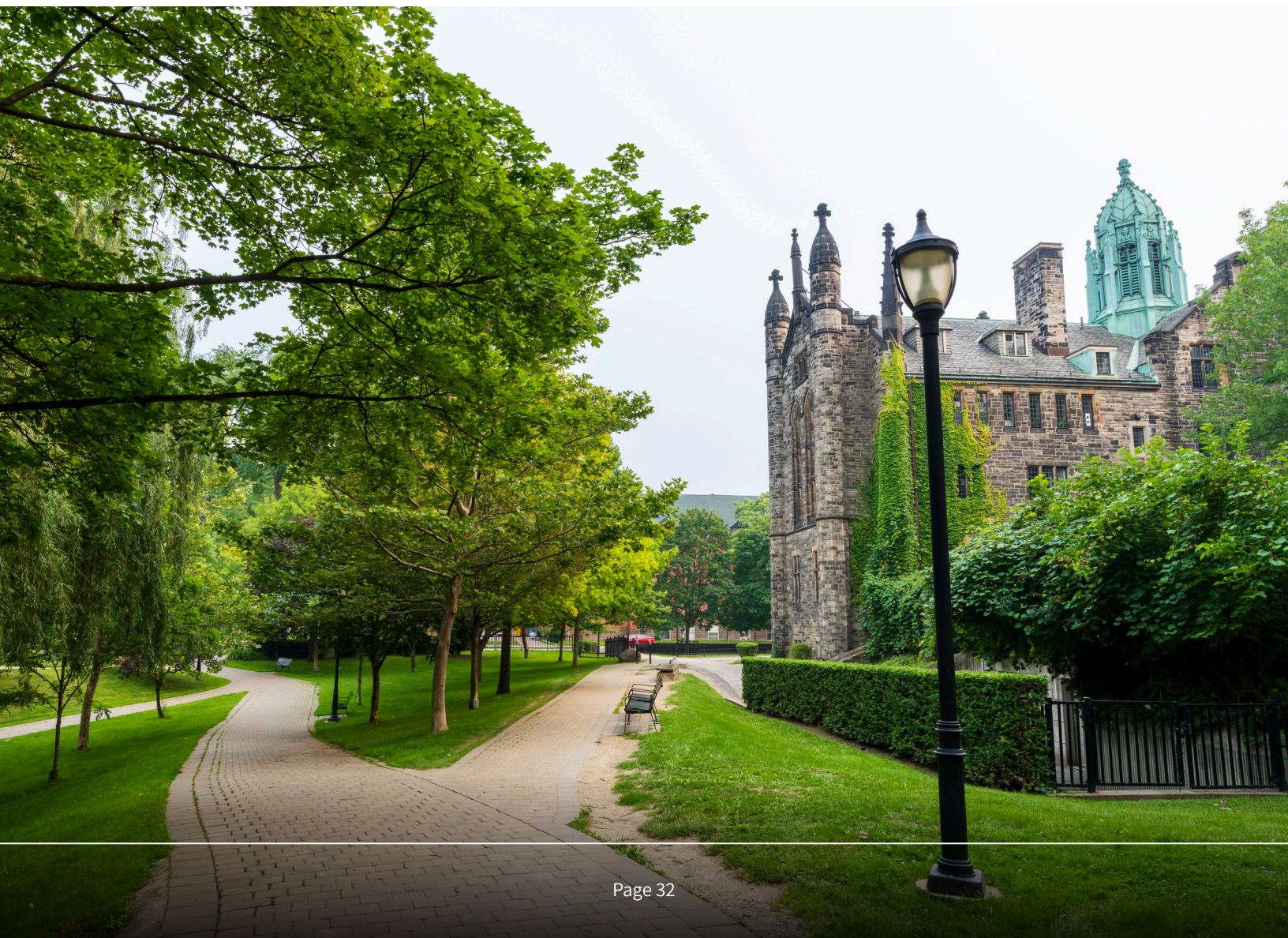
Employers, for their part, are responsible for creating inclusive and accessible workplaces and participating in disability inclusion training across the employment life cycle, with attention to reducing bias and stigma in recruitment, hiring, onboarding, supervision, and retention. Community organizations can support this work by offering disability expertise, employment services, job coaching, and mentorship connections. Postsecondary institutions can leverage the knowledge and experience of community organizations to facilitate the task of creating inclusive employment opportunities.

The other way cross-sector collaboration can improve the school-to-work transition is by coordinating service provision. Navigating different support systems can be a confusing and time-consuming process, and graduates may lose access to their school's disability and/or career services shortly after graduation. Shared referral systems between postsecondary institutions and community organizations, implemented on an opt-in basis, could reduce burden on graduates with disabilities and ensure continuous support is available. A transition coordinator role in institutional accessibility services offices could also support smooth transitions from school into the community and labour market.

The Path Forward

Postsecondary graduates bring knowledge, expertise, and ambition into the workforce. To students and new graduates with disabilities: your career goals and lived experience matter, and you deserve the opportunity to reach your full potential.

All students and graduates deserve support as they move from school to work, yet those with disabilities are too often left to navigate inaccessible systems on their own. Smoother pathways will require coordinated action. Institutions must integrate accessibility and career development, employers must remove barriers and build disability confidence, governments and funders must invest in our postsecondary schools, and community partners must be engaged as collaborators with valuable expertise. When these systems work together, graduates with disabilities are better positioned to thrive and contribute to inclusive work in Canada.



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