



Research Paper Summary

In 2021-22, the Supports for Student Learning Program (SSLP) within ESDC contracted seven research projects to better understand barriers and facilitators to educational attainment in Canada. Each project was led by an external researcher(s) and involved a literature review, a scan of provincial/territorial programs and services, and a discussion paper. The objective of this research series was three-fold:

- 1. Build the knowledge and evidence base and refine the SSLP's understanding of the various groups of clients served (i.e., the barriers they face);*
- 2. Improve the SSLP's capacity to engage in targeted outreach with groups and organizations that serve specific groups or underserved populations (e.g., Black and racialized students, Indigenous students, 2SLGBTQI+ students, youth in care, youth experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and youth facing a digital divide);*
- 3. Inform future directions for the SSLP (e.g., to identify priority streams supporting specific population groups or projects reaching certain underserved students or partners who have expertise in addressing specific barriers).*

Below is an overview of the research project examining barriers and facilitators experienced by students with disabilities. The project was completed in March 2022.

Supports for Student Learning Program Research Series: Barriers Faced by Students with Disabilities

CONTEXT

In Canada, access to postsecondary education (PSE), which includes university, college, or apprenticeship programs, is becoming ever more important in terms of securing future employment, long-term health, and economic security. Statistics Canada suggests that by 2028, over 75% of future jobs will be in high skills sectors and require PSE (Government of Canada, 2017). Longitudinal studies also reinforce the emerging imperative of accessing PSE in terms of long-term health and economic independence (Ballingall, 2015; Fonseca & Zheng, 2011; Irwin, 2015; Kearney et al., 2015). Canada has reached a “universal” level of PSE access; however, access for students with disabilities continues to be more limited (Kirby, 2009).

This research examined systemic barriers students with disabilities encounter in their pursuit of PSE, provincial and territorial disability-related investments to



support PSE students, as well as students' access to, graduation from, and future earnings following PSE participation.

Research Questions

Specifically, the SSLP sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the barriers to education faced by students with disabilities?
2. What services are provided and/or investments have been made by provincial and territorial governments to reduce these barriers? What gaps or overlaps exist?
3. What is the current context as it relates to students with disabilities' access to, graduation from, and future earnings following PSE participation?
4. What recommended actions could Employment and Social Development Canada's SSLP take to reduce these barriers, enhance learning experiences, and overall improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities?

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER(S)

This project was led by [Dr. Gillian Parekh](#), an Assistant Professor and Canada Research Chair in Disability Studies and Education in the Faculty of Education at York University. She is cross-appointed with York's graduate program in Critical Disability studies, where she completed her PhD in Critical Disability Studies in 2014. Dr. Parekh also has experience teaching K-12 students with disabilities, and as being the research coordinator for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). She brings a strong intersectional analysis and disability justice lens to her work, and has a rich understanding of the various models of disability and their critiques, including the social and human rights based models. Dr. Parekh has researched/written about the experiences of students with disabilities in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education, with a specific focus on exclusion/inclusion, academic streaming, and systemic barriers to access.

Dr. Robert S. Brown has worked in applied research for over thirty years, in media research, market research, and education research. After a master's in Communication Studies at the University of Windsor, he completed his doctorate in education at the University of Toronto. A Past President of the Association of Educational Researchers of Ontario, he is a Research Co-ordinator in the Toronto Board of Education and Adjunct Professor at York University, in the Faculty of Education and in Critical Disability Studies. His areas of study include the time structures of schools, including absenteeism; secondary achievement; special education; postsecondary student pathways; longitudinal tracking studies; and

socio-economic and demographic patterns. He has authored or co-authored works in a number of fields including education, psychology, sociology, and medicine.

Dr. David Walters is a professor at the University of Guelph where he studies public policy, quantitative criminology, research methods in criminal justice, applied statistics, education, marginalized youth, school-to-work transitions, and mental health.

Ryan Collis is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at York University. Mr. Collis lives with Autism and his work focuses on the creation of welcoming learning spaces for Autistic students. He has degrees in English, Computer Science, Education, and Science and Technology Studies, and has been a high school teacher in the York Region District School Board since 2006.

Naleni Jacob completed her thesis at Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Disability Studies and is now an independent researcher. Ms. Jacob has taken the expertise she has gained from raising a son with disabilities as motivation for her educational journey. Their relationship has given her the privilege of meeting other families who are facing barriers, and she works to promote disability awareness among members of her own community.

KEY FINDINGS

- Students' pathways to PSE are often fraught by the experiences they have in K-12 public education. In particular, biased perceptions of ability, practices of ability-grouping, academic streaming, and exclusion (such as suspension), have all been highly correlated to PSE access. Students with disabilities¹ arriving to PSE programs often face extensive access barriers related to accommodations, services/supports and the built environments. In the authors' work in schools, they often hear the narrative that marks/grade point averages (GPA) are what define education pathways, not programs (e.g., academic vs. non-academic programs). However, recent studies demonstrate the opposite. Of further concern is that students with disabilities, students from low-income families, Black, Latinx, Indigenous students, and those who are learning English are disproportionately streamed into non-Academic high school

¹ A note on language from Parekh et al.: Many within the disability community adopt identity-first language, such as the term 'disabled', as a way to highlight the social, environmental and political disablement people with various forms of impairment face. New guidelines from the National Centre on Disability and Journalism, in alignment with recommendations from the AP Stylebook (2021), recommends using identity-first language when preference is known and person-first language when describing a group where the preference is not. To align with the aims of the disability community and movements towards disability justice, the authors adopt both identity and person-first language throughout this work.

programs/pathways, meaning they are streamed away from pursuing PSE and, by extension, achieving improved lifelong socioeconomic outcomes.

- Students with disabilities are almost twice as likely to not access PSE compared to their peers without disabilities. In the authors' own research using TDSB data, once students' sociodemographic, program and school-based factors were accounted for, there was only a negligible (1%) gap in graduation rates across disability status. This suggests that much of what explains the initial gap in graduation across disability status is explained by the experiences students had in public school (e.g., streaming, suspension).
- Data analyzed by Parekh and colleagues suggests that students with disabilities are more likely to graduate from college, compared with those without disability, but students without a disability are almost three times more likely to complete university. Post-graduation students with disabilities are unlikely to reach income parity with their peers without disabilities. Unfortunately, this study does not support the narrative that PSE has the potential to be the 'great equalizer' for students with disabilities. After controlling for sociodemographic and school-based predictors, the results revealed that workers with disabilities are more likely to achieve earnings parity with their counterparts without disabilities, only if they do not obtain PSE credentials. Across disability status, the outcomes of PSE credentials do not appear to result in future income parity, suggesting persistent ableism within the workforce.

Key Barriers Identified

Barriers within the Admissions Process:

- According to Statistics Canada, access to PSE continues to be a barrier for students with disabilities. For Canadian youth without disabilities, approximately 77% will enroll in PSE by their early 20s, however that figure drops to 60% for youth with a diagnosed neurodevelopmental disorder, and even further down to 48% for those with mental health conditions (Arim & Frenette, 2019). The levels of enrollment drop even lower for students with both a mental health condition and a neurodevelopmental condition, with only 36% moving on to PSE (Arim & Frenette, 2019).

Funding Barriers:

- In a study examining student's perceptions of PSE-related accommodations, over 40% of respondents identified that they had to undergo psychoeducational assessments, at an average cost of \$1,375.00, as part of the accommodation process (Pierre, 2016). Not only does this create an immediate barrier to PSE entry for students with disabilities seeking accommodation, but it also requires students to take on additional expense.

- Students with disabilities experienced markedly higher rates of debt than their counterparts without disabilities
 - A report by Chambers, Sukai, and Bolton (2011) indicated that:
 - 37% of students with disabilities felt that the funding they received was inadequate to cover their specific accommodation needs
 - 67% of students with disabilities claimed to have encountered serious financial barriers in their studies
 - 35% reported that the cost of living was a major concern.
 - Students with disabilities often have to carry higher debt loads in order to complete their education, as medical issues may interrupt their ability to complete their education compared to students with disabilities.
- Across provinces and territories, there is inconsistency in financial aid supports for postsecondary students with disabilities. Access to financial aid is often conditional, tied to program criteria, and what costs it will cover.
 - As the majority of funding programs are tied to student loans, students must qualify for student loans and have a calculated need of at least \$1. This means that students who do not qualify for student loans will not receive disability assistance. Solely tying disability-related student supports to loans ignores that disability can be, in itself, expensive.
- Availing disability-related financial aid only for employment-focused programs reduces students' options to programs that produce "productive" graduates. In addition to limiting students' choices, this creates a divide where people with disabilities are expected to study to be "useful" while others are permitted access to subjects such as art, literature, and theory-focused fields.

Requirements for Disability and/or Accommodations Disclosure:

- The enrolment process within PSE Disability Services/Support Offices may result in many students with disabilities having to engage in on-going negotiations to ensure that their identified accommodations are honoured and implemented. Parsons et al. (2021) showed that transitioning to PSE often resulted in a decrease of accommodations students were able to receive compared to accommodations provided in K-12 systems.
- Students report feeling uncomfortable disclosing to professors or to students who may be filing accommodation supports.
- Students also report encountering resistance to or disagreement with their identified accommodations from professors or students who may be filing accommodation supports (e.g., scribing).
- In order to avoid conflicts, some students may opt to not disclose their accommodation needs and, instead, try navigating a far more challenging educational environment without support.

Assistive Technologies:

- While assistive technologies (AT) are often employed as key accommodations, the associated funding to secure AT is often unavailable to students with

disabilities. Students with disabilities bear the additional burden of having to collect documentation and assessments from healthcare providers in order to qualify for AT related funding and accommodation. Students also often end up missing crucial instructional time due to the inability to acquire AT or as a result of AT breakdown.

Accessibility Challenges on Campus:

- Students are often required to sit in rooms with staircases and barriers that limit their seating options, removing them from being close to the instructor.
- Social, recreational, retail locations may be in areas of the campus that students with limited mobility cannot access
- Emergency evacuation procedures may not be inclusive and may put students at a higher level of risk than students without disabilities
- Accessible On-Campus housing may be limited due to the age of buildings or the structure of bathrooms and other facilities
- Parking locations may be distant and inaccessible to students with mobility issues (NEADS, 2012)
- Students also face hidden barriers, including inaccessible lab space or tools.

Disability Representation is Lacking:

- One of the key attitudinal barriers to success is the absence of faculty with disabilities within postsecondary institutions. The stigmatization pervasive in K-12 schooling, is often replicated in the post-secondary environment, creating barriers towards perceived ability.

COVID-19:

- Once COVID-19 hit, many schools and disability services were either moved online or were closed. For many families of young children with disabilities, the pandemic resulted in a loss of disability-related support and critical community services (Gallagher-McKay et al., 2021).
- The COVID-19 pandemic added a new level of strain for students who are reliant on assistive technologies to support their in-class instruction as there is decreased support and interventions to address technology-related issues should they emerge.
- According to Pitchette, Brumwell, and Rizk (2020), during COVID-19, students with disabilities have reported: “uncertainty about course expectations and how to access support; difficulty focusing, staying on top of readings and assignments, and issues understanding course material; inadequate access to accommodations and accessible material; difficulty communicating and building or sustaining relationships; inequitable access to, and problematic assumptions about, technology and internet; and inaccessible assessments. [...] Students who may not have previously identified as having an accessibility need have recently found themselves facing challenges and are now in need of support or accommodations (para. 2)”.

- COVID-19 promoted a broader discussion about accessibility, technology, and participation. Parekh et al. note that many colleagues have shared the common thought that “once everyone needed accommodations to access their work or studies, it was made acceptable and available to all” – the assurance of access and flexibility that disability communities have long been advocating for.
- ARCH Disability Law Centre (2020) recommends that all digital approaches implemented to support students with disabilities during COVID-19 should be open to review, particularly when assistive technologies are employed

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Tackling ableism within the education sector requires targeted intervention across all levels of study. As such, the researchers devised a number of recommendations for consideration:

Reconceptualizing Definitions and Responses:

- Disability, in relation to public and PSE, must be reconceptualized. There is tremendous inconsistency and fragmentation across the early years, K-12, and PSE sectors in terms of how disability is understood and how systems respond (Parekh & Brown, 2020; Parsons et al., 2021).

Recognizing Health Implications of PSE:

- Recognize that postsecondary access is an equity issue that has implications in students’ long-term health (Raphael, 2015).

Improved Data Collection and Impact Measurement:

- Greater tracking and accountability for program access and outcomes that disproportionately affect students with disabilities along the K-12 and postsecondary trajectories (e.g., “special education”, academic streams, specialized programming; Deller & Tamburri, 2019; Parekh, 2014; Quan & James, 2017).

Youth-Led and/or Youth-Fed Program Reviews:

- New and existing programs designed to support students with disabilities should be reviewed by an established youth advisory table or through ongoing partnerships with youth with disabilities and their families (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2016).

Evidence-Based Tutoring:

- Tutoring programs can be a useful tool in supporting student achievement (Yau, Mundy, Gallagher-Mackay, & Ta, 2022). Based on research undertaken in Toronto, effective tutoring program characteristics include having a robust

connection to school curriculum, offering frequent access, commitment to developing relationships between tutors and students, support and training for tutors, and ongoing formative assessments for students (Robinson & Loeb, 2021; as cited in Yau, et al, 2022).

- Meta-analyses, such as Gallagher-Mackay, Mundy, Feitosa de Britto, & Asim (2021), support the effectiveness of high-dosage tutoring programs. Yet, there is often a lack of coordination between community-based tutoring programs as many adopt different models and are funded through various agencies and organizations (Yau, et al, 2022).
- Supporting high-dosage, community-based tutoring programs is important, as would be the development of an infrastructure that would enable coordination across programs.

Investing in Communities:

- Investments into community-based early intervention, transition, and bridging programs, particularly between K-12 and PSE sectors, is effective (Deller & Tamburri, 2019). For instance, as Deller (2018) describes, there are many shared characteristics across “good” early intervention programs that support lower-income students. These include financial supports, multi-service opportunities for counselling, and “soft-skill” training, but may also require keenly motivated students.
- Evidence has shown that early intervention programs can help students access postsecondary programs, but there is little evidence that they help students “get through” them.
- Therefore, the authors’ recommendation is to invest in both early intervention programs as well as additional supports for students with disabilities as they move through their postsecondary programs.

Tailored Bridging Programs:

- Chatoor (2021) suggests that bridging programs between PSE institutions and the workforce be put in place to support PSE graduates as they transition from PSE to employment: “*This programming should consider the health needs of these individuals, particularly students with learning, physical and mental health disabilities*” (para. 9).

Student Agency and Self-Determination:

- As it can be difficult to navigate accessing accommodations and supports offered through PSIs, providing students with funding for further supports related to their studies could be helpful. For instance, grants for which students can determine their use could benefit students’ access to tutors, editing services, scribes, technology, and academic or support counselling services.

Increased Financial Aid Flexibility:

- Financial investments are critically important to ensuring that students with disabilities can access and succeed in PSE.

- It is clear from the literature and from the study that students with disabilities are grappling with low income, face significant expenses related to mobility and accommodation devices, as well as face systemic barriers in accessing equitable employment.
- Investing in further disability-related grants or working with student loan agencies to convert more loans into grants appear to be of significant importance.
- However, the best way to improve access is to offer financial aid to people with disabilities in a way that they can self-direct/self-manage costs.

Automatic Enrollment in Debt-Repayment Assistance:

- Debt-repayment assistance plans should be set up to automatically enroll students (Deller& Tamburri, 2019) and take into account the structural ableism embedded in the workforce that students will encounter once they leave school (Chatoor, 2021).

Centralization of Information and Resources:

- In order to access and succeed in PSE, students with disabilities are often required to navigate a number of different systems to secure funding assistance, assessments, accommodations, and services.
- As supports are typically offered through disparate organizations and programs, it would helpful for students and their families if there was further coordination.
- The development of a central or federal system through which students with disabilities and their families could access key information on what is available in their area, particularly in relation to access, support through and into the workforce, as well as the requirements to pursue different funding and support opportunities would be an important resource.

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