

Student Voice: Thematic Analysis of the Horizons Career Development Survey

Marie Mitsou, B.Ed., M.Ed., RP, CCC
Senior Counsellor, Career and Employment
Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL)

April 2026

Contents

Abstract	3
Résumé	3
1. Introduction and Purpose	3
2. Methodology	4
2.1 The Horizons Program and How Students Encounter It	4
2.2 Data Source.....	4
2.3 Who Responded	5
2.4 Analytical Approach	6
2.5 Scope and Limitations	6
3. Summary of Thematic Findings	6
4. Thematic Findings	7
4.1 Self-Awareness and Reflective Growth	7
4.2 Career Clarity and Sense of Direction	8
4.3 Confidence and Willingness to Act	8
4.4 Navigating Uncertainty and Future Readiness	9
4.5 Practical Skills Development and Tools	10
4.6 Goal-Setting and Self-Directed Planning	10
4.7 Relational Support, Community, and Human Connection	12
4.8 Mental Health and Well-Being	12
5. The Space and Relational Support Argument	13
5.1 Equity Implications	14
5.2 What Students Are Asking For.....	14
6. Recommendations	15
Recommendation 1: Automatic access for all incoming students.....	15
Recommendation 2: Formalize embedding across multiple access points	15
Recommendation 3: Protect and invest in the relational infrastructure	16
7. Conclusion	16
References.....	17

Abstract

This report presents a thematic analysis of 112 open-ended survey responses collected in December 2025 from students who had participated in the Horizons Career Development Program. Horizons is the University of Ottawa's bilingual digital career development program, developed and managed by the Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL) unit and integrated with the in-person services and relational programming offered at Career Corner. Using inductive thematic analysis, eight recurring thematic clusters were identified and aligned with CDEL's five Career Development Learning Outcomes and the program-level objective of Career Agency. Findings confirm that students are experiencing the developmental shifts that career development theory predicts, including growth in self-awareness, career clarity, confidence, and goal-directed agency. A cross-cutting finding of direct institutional consequence emerges consistently: the deepest developmental outcomes are produced through sustained relational interaction within the stable environment of Career Corner, not through digital engagement alone. Three recommendations are offered in support of CDEL's initiative to establish a university-wide career development ecosystem, known at uOttawa as Build Your Future (BYF): universal automatic access to Horizons for all incoming students, expansion of multiple embedding pathways, and sustained investment in the relational infrastructure of Career Corner.

Résumé

Ce rapport présente une analyse thématique de 112 réponses ouvertes recueillies en décembre 2025 auprès d'étudiant.es ayant participé au programme de développement de carrière Horizons. Horizons est le programme numérique bilingue de développement de carrière de l'Université d'Ottawa, conçu et géré par le service de Développement de carrière et apprentissage par l'expérience (DCAE) et intégré aux services en personne et à la programmation relationnelle offerts au Coin carrière. Au moyen d'une analyse thématique inductive, huit regroupements thématiques récurrents ont été dégagés et mis en relation avec les cinq résultats d'apprentissage en développement de carrière du DCAE et l'objectif d'agentivité de carrière. Les constats confirment que les étudiant.es vivent les transformations développementales que prédit la théorie du développement de carrière, notamment une croissance de la connaissance de soi, de la clarté de carrière, de la confiance et de l'agentivité orientée vers des objectifs. Un constat transversal aux conséquences institutionnelles directes ressort de façon constante : les résultats développementaux les plus profonds naissent d'une interaction relationnelle soutenue dans l'environnement stable du Coin carrière, et non du seul engagement numérique. Trois recommandations sont formulées à l'appui de l'initiative du DCAE visant à créer un écosystème de développement de carrière à l'échelle de l'université, désignée à l'Université d'Ottawa sous le nom de Bâtir son avenir (BSA) : l'accès automatique et universel à Horizons pour l'ensemble des étudiant.es de première année, l'élargissement des multiples voies d'intégration et un investissement soutenu dans l'infrastructure relationnelle du Coin carrière.

1. Introduction and Purpose

This report presents a thematic analysis of student survey responses collected following participation in the Horizons Career Development Program, the University of Ottawa's bilingual digital career development program developed and managed by the Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL) unit and integrated with the in-person services and relational programming offered at Career Corner (see Section 2.1 for a program overview and description of deployment pathways). The analysis serves two related purposes.

First, it provides empirical, student-generated evidence that the five Career Development Learning Outcomes and the program-level objective of Career Agency, articulated by CDEL, are already being produced by existing programming at the Career Corner. The qualitative data confirms that students are experiencing precisely the developmental shifts that career development theory predicts and that CDEL's professional practice is designed to support.

Second, this analysis provides institutional evidence for a finding that theory anticipates and that students articulate with consistency: developmental outcomes in career education are not produced by digital content or informational resources alone. They are produced through sustained, relational engagement within a stable and trusted environment. The physical space of the Career Corner, accessible professional staff, and peer mentorship are not supplementary features of the Horizons program. They are the developmental infrastructure through which its outcomes are realized.

These two findings together constitute the evidentiary foundation for Build Your Future (BYF): the conditions for meaningful career development are already functioning organically at Career Corner. What it provides is the architecture to make those conditions visible, progressive, equitably accessible, and strengthened through collaboration with faculties.

2. Methodology

2.1 The Horizons Program and How Students Encounter It

The Horizons program does not reach students exclusively through self-directed enrollment. CDEL actively delivers career development content and experiential activities directly in classrooms across the university, bringing career education into the academic environment rather than waiting for students to seek it out. Beyond CDEL-led classroom delivery, individual professors and departments have independently integrated Horizons into their course design, assigning modules as graded components of their curriculum. This ground-up academic adoption positions career development not as an extracurricular supplement but as a legitimate dimension of the academic experience. The student quoted in Section 4.4 who encountered Horizons through AHL1100 illustrates precisely what this integration produces.

2.2 Data Source

The dataset consists of 112 open-ended survey responses collected in December 2025 from students who had participated in the Horizons Career Development Program. The survey instrument consisted of five open-ended questions organized in two interconnected sets, followed by a demographic section. The first set invited students to reflect on their program experience:

- How would you describe your overall experience with Horizons?
- What did you appreciate most about the program?
- In what ways has the program influenced your academic, personal, or professional journey?

The second set invited students to contribute to program improvement:

- Do you have any suggestions to help improve the Horizons program?
- What aspects could be enhanced, clarified, or better supported?

Responses were collected in both English and French, consistent with the bilingual mandate of the University of Ottawa and the Horizons program itself. French-language responses were analyzed in the original language and are cited in both original and translated form where quoted.

2.3 Who Responded

All 112 survey responses were validated and assigned to faculty, level of study, and year of study through a manual review process. Responses that were ambiguous or incomplete were resolved through contextual analysis of program descriptions. Respondents represent seven faculties, with the largest representations from the Faculty of Science (22.3%), Faculty of Social Sciences (17.9%), and Faculty of Engineering (17.9%). Respondents were predominantly undergraduate students (85.7%), distributed roughly evenly across all four years of study. Approximately 70% were studying in English and 30% in French, reflecting the bilingual character of the uOttawa student population. Thematic patterns are consistent across both language communities. The demographic distribution of respondents is presented in Figure 1 below.

Level

Level	n	%
Undergraduate	96	85.7%
Graduate	16	14.3%

Faculty

Faculty	n	%
Faculty of Science	25	22.3%
Faculty of Social Sciences	20	17.9%
Faculty of Engineering	20	17.9%
Faculty of Health Sciences	15	13.4%
Telfer School of Management	15	13.4%
Faculty of Arts	14	12.5%
Faculty of Education	3	2.7%

Year of Study (undergraduate students only, n=95)

Year	n	%
1st year	29	30.5%
2nd year	28	29.5%
3rd year	19	20.0%
4th year	19	20.0%

Language of Study

Language	n	%
English	79	70.5%
French	33	29.5%

Figure 1. Respondent demographics by faculty, level of study, year of study, and language of study (N = 112).

2.4 Analytical Approach

Responses were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Codes were generated directly from student language, without imposing a predetermined categorical structure. Themes were then interpreted in relation to CDEL's five Career Development Learning Outcomes and the program-level objective of Career Agency, and the relational and environmental conditions documented in the supporting literature.

The analytical process identified eight recurring thematic clusters. These clusters were subsequently aligned with the five Career Development Learning Outcomes and the program-level objective of Career Agency. One additional cluster, Relational Support, Community, and Human Connection, was identified as a cross-cutting enabling condition present across all outcome areas rather than mapping to a single outcome.

2.5 Scope and Limitations

This analysis is qualitative and descriptive in nature. It does not claim statistical representativeness and is not designed to support causal inference. It is intended to provide a rich, detailed account of student developmental experience, to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset, and to situate those patterns within CDEL's theoretical and practice framework. Quantitative claims regarding effect sizes and outcome prevalence are drawn from the published research literature reviewed in the companion literature review (Mitsou, 2025). The quantitative analysis of Horizons reach, engagement, and readiness change is presented in the companion quantitative analysis (Mitsou, 2026c), which complements the findings presented here by documenting program reach across the student population, multi-year companion engagement, and pre/post readiness gains on the Career Readiness Quiz.

3. Summary of Thematic Findings

The following table presents the eight thematic clusters identified across the 112 responses, their alignment to CDEL's Career Development Learning Outcomes, and a qualitative frequency assessment. Detailed discussion of each theme follows in Section 4.

THEME	CDEL OUTCOME / PROGRAM OBJECTIVE	FREQUENCY
Self-awareness and reflective growth	Knowing Yourself	Very high
Career clarity and sense of direction	Career Identity	Very high
Confidence and willingness to act	Career Confidence	Very high
Navigating uncertainty and future readiness	Adaptability	High
Practical skills development and tools	Skills Literacy	High
Goal-setting and self-directed planning	Career Agency	High
Relational support, community, and human connection (cross-cutting enabling condition)	All outcomes	High
Mental health and well-being (cross-cutting outcome)	All outcomes	Moderate-high

Figure 2. Eight thematic clusters mapped to CDEL's five Career Development Learning Outcomes and the program-level objective of Career Agency. Frequency designations are qualitative estimates: *Very High* indicates the theme appeared in the majority of substantive responses; *High* indicates frequent appearance across a significant minority; *Moderate-High* indicates consistent appearance with somewhat less density.

4. Thematic Findings

4.1 Self-Awareness and Reflective Growth

Aligned to CDEL Outcome 1: Knowing Yourself

The most foundational outcome in CDEL's developmental sequence is Knowing Yourself: developing self-awareness through the exploration of personal interests, values, strengths, and lived experiences. It is among the most consistently reported gains across the dataset. Students describe a recognizable pattern: engagement with the program prompted a turn inward, and that turn produced a shift in how they understand themselves in relation to their futures.

« J'ai eu une très bonne expérience avec le programme Horizons. Ce programme m'a permis de me connaître moi-même. Mes forces et faiblesses. Et il m'a permis de mieux m'orienter. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

"My overall experience with Horizons has been very positive. The program provided a supportive environment that encouraged self-reflection, meaningful discussion, and personal growth. I felt engaged throughout the activities, and the structure of the program made it easy to connect ideas to my own life and goals." – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Ce que j'ai le plus apprécié dans ce programme, c'est la possibilité d'identifier et de mieux comprendre mes forces et mes faiblesses, ainsi que d'avoir accès aux ressources nécessaires pour les développer. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“I loved the Knowing Yourself section and the list of resources in Career Exploration. Both were very helpful in understanding how I should move forward in curating my career.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Ce programme nous aide à se reconnaître et à construire notre identité professionnelle. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

The reflexive quality of these responses is noteworthy. Students are not describing having received information about career options. They are describing a developmental shift in self-concept: a change in how they see themselves. This is precisely the outcome that Holland’s person-environment fit theory and Super’s life-span development theory describe as the prerequisite for all subsequent career development. These responses also point to the early emergence of what Savickas’s career construction theory describes as concern, the first of four career adaptability dimensions, and what Super describes as career maturity.

4.2 Career Clarity and Sense of Direction

Aligned to CDEL Outcome 2: Career Identity

Career identity development emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent thematic signals in the dataset. Students across programs, years, and language communities describe versions of the same experience: before engaging with Horizons, direction was unclear; after engagement, a clearer sense of path had begun to form.

« Personnellement, Horizons m’a aidé à être plus certaine de ce que je veux faire dans le futur et m’a aussi aidé à trouver des choix d’emploi. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Le programme m’a aidé à mieux me situer dans mon objectif professionnel et m’a fait réfléchir sur ce que je veux. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“It has helped me understand my personal path and how to get there.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Le programme influence mon parcours académique dans la mesure où il me permet d’être plus déterminé dans mon choix de carrière. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

The language students use consistently maps onto Savickas’s career construction framework. Words like “clearer direction,” “sense of path,” and “clearer goals” recur across the dataset. This is not satisfaction language; it is the vocabulary of identity formation. Students are describing the process of connecting who they are to where they are going, which is the core developmental task of Career Identity. A subset of responses also reveals the particular value of this outcome for students who entered the program with significant uncertainty, including international students, first-year students, and students navigating complex post-graduate decisions.

4.3 Confidence and Willingness to Act

Aligned to CDEL Outcome 3: Career Confidence

Confidence is the single most frequently invoked outcome in the dataset. It appears in nearly every substantive response, in both languages, across all program engagement levels. This is consistent with the research literature reviewed in the companion conceptual framework (Mitsou, 2026a), which identifies self-efficacy development as the most robust predictor of career exploration, decision-making, and persistence (Lent, Brown, and Hackett, 1994; Bandura, 1986).

“It pushed me in the right direction. Everyone was actually helpful, and the program felt intentional. I always knew why I was doing something. It made me more confident and clearer about what I want. I make decisions faster, I communicate better, and I am way more aware of my strengths, academically and professionally. It shaped how I see my path moving forward.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Ça m'a rendu beaucoup plus confortable à explorer diverses opportunités dans mon domaine (sciences et sciences de la santé) et plus confiante à essayer de nouvelles choses qui pourraient potentiellement aider à bâtir un futur meilleur pour moi-même. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“I had a very good experience with Horizons overall. The community, the practical learning opportunities and the personalized guidance were the things I appreciated the most. The program has had a major impact in shaping my growth in baby steps through giving me confidence, teaching me new things, and helping me to realise my goals for the future.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“The program has influenced me by boosting my confidence, helping me align my academic choices with my long-term aspirations, and giving me a more strategic and proactive approach to planning my professional journey.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

Critically, CDEL defines Career Confidence not only as a felt state but as a behavioural one, measured not by what students feel but by what they try. Several responses capture this behavioural dimension explicitly: students describe applying for co-op positions, attending career fairs, revising professional documents, and engaging in networking activities they had previously avoided. This is the expression of self-efficacy that Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory identifies as the mechanism of change: small mastery experiences that accumulate into durable belief in one's own capacity to act.

4.4 Navigating Uncertainty and Future Readiness

Aligned to CDEL Outcome 4: Adaptability

A consistent pattern in the dataset involves students describing a reduction in the overwhelm associated with career uncertainty. The labour market, post-graduation transition, and career decision-making are experienced by many students as anxiety-producing. Horizons is credited with making these domains more navigable, not by eliminating uncertainty, but by providing tools, frameworks, and relationships that allow students to engage with uncertainty more purposefully.

“Very positive! It was a part of my coursework for AHL1100, and honestly one of my favourite parts. The content was easy to take in and fun to listen to. Even the quizzes at the end felt less like quizzes and more like fun and easy activities. So, academically, it made me feel more confident and capable. Personally and professionally, it helped de-mystify the job market, which has soothed a lot of the anxieties I had about just how un-aware of it I was.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“The course was easy to follow, well-structured, and beneficial for clarifying things I hadn't really sat down to contemplate, like my long-term goals and the skills I've actually built throughout undergrad. It made career exploration feel less overwhelming and more intentional.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“The [staff] from career services talked to my class about Horizons, and it was really helpful having a bunch of resources in my Brightspace to look at. The program helped me figure out other occupational paths I hadn't really thought about previously.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

Savickas's career adaptability model describes four capacities, concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, that together constitute a student's capacity to navigate career development in uncertain conditions. The responses in this theme cluster describe the progressive development of exactly these capacities: students moving from anxiety about an opaque future toward curiosity and engagement with

possibilities they had not previously imagined or accessed. This theme is also strongly connected to the equity argument developed in Section 5: students with less social capital describe adaptability gains in disproportionately strong terms, reflecting that for these students the program provided navigational capacity rather than merely supplementing existing resources.

4.5 Practical Skills Development and Tools

Aligned to CDEL Outcome 5: Skills Literacy

The Horizons program's modular structure maps directly onto the practical dimensions of career readiness: resume development, cover letter writing, LinkedIn profile construction, interview preparation, networking strategy, and labour market awareness. Student responses consistently reference these concrete, transferable outcomes.

"I found it a very helpful experience in understanding the workforce. I had already completed all of the modules in October but find myself coming back to the readings due to their valuable insights in building your resume, cover letter, joining the workforce and overall building knowledge for your career which I think is valuable for every university student." – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« J'ai vraiment aimé les outils d'autopromotion numérique. Ça m'a beaucoup aidé à savoir comment bâtir mon CV et je peux maintenant aussi aider d'autres personnes à bâtir le leur » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

"Very helpful and insightful. Especially the section that discussed professionalism because it gives a good standard of what professionalism really means when applied to the workplace. This module has saved me a lot of unprofessional mistakes." – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

"The contents were useful. I liked how the information was categorized because it made the learning objectives clear, and information digestible. I think the program gave me a lot of resources that I have and will continue to use to prepare me for entering the work force in a position that I'm happy with. I feel more informed on the aspects that my future employers will be looking for, as well as the key factors in choosing a career. I enjoyed elements like the quizzes and provided resource pages for providing me an opportunity to engage in what I had learned, and leave with documentation of it." – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

The response above is an analytically significant example of Skills Literacy as CDEL defines it: not only the development of competency, but the capacity to recognize, name, and articulate that competency, and in this case to transfer it to others. This student has moved beyond skill acquisition into intentional development: the strategic capacity to understand one's own competencies and apply them purposefully. The accessibility of the program's tools and resources also emerges as an enabling condition here, with students describing the modular structure, bilingual content, and self-paced format as reducing barriers to engagement.

4.6 Goal-Setting and Self-Directed Planning

Aligned to CDEL program-level objective: Career Agency

Career Agency is the program-level objective of CDEL's developmental sequence. It is the integrative outcome toward which all five Career Development Learning Outcomes contribute, describing the capacity to author one's own path: to reflect, make meaning across accumulated experience, and act with intention toward a self-directed future. The survey data captures early expressions of this outcome in students who have engaged deeply with the program, particularly those who have participated in both the online modules and the in-person programming at Career Corner.

« Ce programme a eu un impact important sur mon parcours. Sur le plan académique, il m'a aidé à améliorer mes stratégies d'organisation et de gestion du temps. Sur le plan personnel, il m'a permis de gagner en confiance et de mieux définir mes objectifs. Sur le plan professionnel, Horizons a renforcé mes compétences en communication et m'a offert des opportunités concrètes de réseautage qui orientent maintenant mes choix de carrière. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Le programme m'a aidé dans mon parcours puisqu'il m'a permis de me questionner sur mes motivations par rapport à ma carrière ainsi que de mon parcours universitaire. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“My experience with the Horizons Career Development (Program) has been highly rewarding, providing me with practical tools, guidance, and mentorship that helped me clarify my career goals and create an actionable plan. I especially appreciated the program’s focus on self-awareness, skill-building, and connecting with professionals, which offered insights beyond the classroom. It has influenced my journey by giving me both direction and the confidence to pursue my goals intentionally.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Mon expérience globale avec Horizons a été très enrichissante. Le programme m'a offert un environnement structuré et bienveillant qui m'a permis de réfléchir à mes objectifs, de mieux comprendre mes forces et d'explorer de nouvelles possibilités pour mon avenir. J'ai particulièrement apprécié la combinaison d'ateliers pratiques, d'outils interactifs et de moments de réflexion personnelle, qui m'ont aidé à progresser de façon concrète et continue. Dans l'ensemble, Horizons a représenté une expérience motivante et constructive qui m'a réellement aidé à clarifier mes ambitions » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

This response traces the full arc of CDEL’s developmental sequence in a single voice: self-awareness (Knowing Yourself), skill-building (Skills Literacy), professional connection (Career Identity), and an actionable plan pursued with intention (Career Agency). Goal-setting language appears frequently across the dataset in both languages, with students describing clearer academic and career plans, more intentional decision-making, and a stronger sense of ownership over their own trajectories. This pattern is particularly prominent in students who have experienced sustained engagement over multiple interactions, consistent with research showing that career agency develops through iterative, relational engagement rather than single encounters.

STUDENT VOICE	MAPPED TO THE DEVELOPMENTAL ARC
“Practical tools, guidance, and mentorship helped me clarify my career goals and create an actionable plan... giving me both direction and the confidence to pursue my goals intentionally.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025	1 Knowing Yourself from practical tools and self-awareness activities 2 Career Identity from guidance toward clearer direction 3 Career Confidence from mentorship and accumulated mastery Career Agency expressed as intentional, self-directed action

Figure 3. The five Career Development Learning Outcomes and the program-level objective of Career Agency as a progressive developmental arc, with student voice mapped to the sequence.

4.7 Relational Support, Community, and Human Connection

Cross-cutting enabling condition across all Career Development Learning Outcomes

The most consequential finding in this dataset for institutional planning is this: students who report the deepest and most specific developmental gains almost invariably also describe a person as the agent of that change. The mentor, the staff member, the community of peers at Career Corner are not incidental to the outcomes students describe. They are the mechanism through which those outcomes are produced.

“What I appreciated most was the sense of community. The mentors were welcoming, understanding, and relatable, and they created a space where I felt comfortable asking questions and seeking guidance.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« J’ai particulièrement apprécié l’accompagnement personnalisé, la disponibilité de l’équipe ainsi que les activités qui encouragent la réflexion sur soi, la motivation et le développement de compétences essentielles. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“I found the program to be engaging and supportive, helping me to grow my career opportunities. I appreciated the mentorship, the sense of community, and how the program connected me with resources I didn’t know existed.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Horizons m’a offert l’occasion d’élargir mon réseau et de connecter avec d’autres étudiants et professionnels inspirants. De plus, les outils et logiciels fournis facilitent grandement l’accès aux ressources éducatives et au soutien disponible. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

This pattern is theoretically consistent and empirically robust. Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory identifies modelling and guided feedback as the primary mechanisms for building self-efficacy. Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development demonstrates that learning accelerates in the presence of a more knowledgeable other who scaffolds growth beyond what the student could achieve independently. Tinto’s (1987) retention research establishes that academic and social integration are among the strongest predictors of persistence, particularly for first-year and equity-deserving students.

The online modules provide foundational content knowledge. But the students who describe the most substantial developmental gains describe that content as having been made personally meaningful and actionable through conversations with staff and peer mentors at Career Corner. The space enables these interactions. The career educators (specialists and counsellors) provide interpretation, challenge, and accountability. The peer mentors normalize uncertainty and model possibility. These three components constitute a relational developmental ecosystem: an environment in which development is not merely supported but produced. This finding carries direct institutional implications: fragmenting, reducing, or virtualizing that environment does not simply change the mode of delivery. It removes the mechanism of change.

4.8 Mental Health and Well-Being

Cross-cutting outcome with particular relevance for equity-deserving students

Career uncertainty is a well-documented source of psychological distress among university students (Kwok, 2018). The dataset contains consistent evidence that engagement with Horizons contributes to reduced anxiety, increased sense of direction, and improved psychological orientation toward the future. As Redekopp and Huston (2019) demonstrate, career clarity and mental health are not separate outcomes. They are interdependent dimensions of the same developmental process.

“Personally and professionally, it helped de-mystify the job market, which has soothed a lot of the anxieties I had about just how unaware of it I was” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

« Le programme est une expérience très enrichissante et structurante et bien organisée qui offre de bonnes ressources qui m'aide bien à me guider vers différentes disciplines, notamment en tant qu'étudiante de première année un peu perdue au début. » – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“I do wish I used it sooner. My first couple years of undergrad were overtaken by COVID-19... I didn't feel as motivated to socialize or reach out for help. I guess I didn't understand the steps in excelling in your degree. Maybe if I used horizons during that time, it could've helped me out.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

“It helped me feel less alone in figuring out my career. Knowing that other students are going through the same thing and that there is support available made a big difference to how I approached my job search.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

The mental health signal in the data is particularly pronounced in responses from international students and students who describe having entered the program with significant uncertainty. For these students, the program provided not only career knowledge but a stabilizing sense of direction at a moment of personal and academic transition. This is consistent with Milot-Lapointe and Arifoulline's (2025) meta-analytic finding that individual career counselling produces significant effects on psychological distress and life satisfaction, with effects strongest when the relational quality of the intervention is high.

5. The Space and Relational Support Argument

The evidence presented in Section 4 supports a finding that has both theoretical grounding and institutional consequence: the developmental outcomes reported by Horizons students are not produced by digital content alone. They are produced through the relational ecosystem of Career Corner: dedicated physical space, accessible professional staff, and peer mentorship, working together as the conditions under which career development theory predicts growth will occur.

“The program provided a supportive and welcoming environment [at Career Corner] that made it easier to navigate my university career life, especially as I worked toward my academic goals. It felt like a space where my career growth, both as a student and as an individual was genuinely prioritized. What I appreciated most about the program was the sense of community and guidance it offered. Having access to resources, and structured support helped me feel more confident and motivated.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

Across 112 responses, the most substantive and specific accounts of developmental change consistently include relational and environmental language. The students who describe the clearest gains across self-awareness, career direction, confidence, adaptability, and goal-setting are also those who describe mentors by their qualities, staff by their availability, and the space itself as a place they return to. Engagement depth and developmental specificity are correlated with relational engagement, not merely with module completion.

HORIZONS		CAREER CORNER	
Entry point into career development	→	Sustained relational environment	
Self-directed enrollment	→	Facilitated peer exchanges	
Classroom delivery	→	Peer mentors	
Graded course integration	→	Specialists	
Career Corner in-person	→	Professional counsellors	

Figure 4. The Career Corner relational ecosystem: Horizons as the entry point, Career Corner as the environment where outcomes become transformative.

5.1 Equity Implications

The equity dimension of this finding deserves particular emphasis. Students from equity-deserving communities, including international students, first-generation students, and students navigating transitions without family context or professional networks, are both the students who stand to benefit most from career development support and the students least likely to independently navigate toward it.

“J’aime beaucoup ce service à l’université. Parce qu’en tant qu’étudiante internationale, je ne sais pas vraiment quelles sont mes possibilités d’emploi. Donc j’ai vraiment apprécié comment rédiger mon CV, ma lettre de motivation, etc.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

These responses illustrate what Social Cognitive Career Theory describes as the structural dimension of career development: equity-deserving students face not only personal uncertainty but environmental barriers, including limited professional networks, unfamiliarity with local employment practices, and reduced access to the informal knowledge that more privileged peers navigate intuitively. A program that relies on self-directed discovery will systematically reproduce the advantages of students who already possess navigational capital. This is the equity argument for Build Your Future: its architecture must be designed to actively reach students who will not independently discover the connections between career development and experiential learning that the system currently requires them to find on their own.

5.2 What Students Are Asking For

The program improvement survey, completed by 91 students, adds a further dimension to this evidence. Approximately one third of respondents offered no suggestions, responding with variations of “no changes needed” or “the program is already strong.” That level of satisfaction from an open-ended improvement question is itself a meaningful finding.

Among those who did offer suggestions, two patterns emerge with particular clarity. The first is a consistent request for more human contact: more one-on-one coaching, more in-person workshops, more opportunities to talk with staff and peers. Students are not asking for more content. They are asking for more people.

“More one on one coaching slots would be helpful, especially during busy recruiting periods.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

The second pattern is an awareness and access gap. A consistent cluster of responses in both English and French describe not knowing the program existed, or knowing it existed but not understanding what it was or why it mattered. This is not a program quality problem. It is an architecture problem: students who are not actively seeking career support are not finding their way to a program designed to help them.

“I think it could be more widely discussed and promoted as I was unaware of it until today and I know many of my friends are unaware of this program.” – uOttawa student, Horizons Survey 2025

These two patterns are connected. Students who have found the program describe wanting more human engagement once they are there. Students who have not yet arrived describe not knowing it exists. Both signals point toward the same institutional response: a program architecture that reaches students proactively at the right moment in their degree, and connects them to the relational support that the evidence shows produces the deepest developmental gains.

6. Recommendations

Based on the thematic findings presented in this report, the following recommendations are offered in support of Build Your Future (BYF) and CDEL's broader program development agenda. Recommendations 1 and 2 below are supported jointly by the qualitative evidence presented in this report and the quantitative evidence presented in the companion quantitative analysis (Mitsou, 2026c). Recommendation 3 addresses an institutional condition that the qualitative evidence identifies with particular force: the relational infrastructure of Career Corner as the mechanism through which Horizons' developmental outcomes are realized.

Recommendation 1: Provide automatic access to Horizons for all incoming students

The most consistent signal in the improvement survey data is an awareness and access gap: students who found the program describe wanting more, while students who did not engage describe simply not knowing it existed. This is not a program quality problem. It is an architecture problem. Providing automatic Brightspace enrollment in Horizons for all incoming students at the start of their first year would eliminate the discovery barrier entirely, ensuring that career development is a visible and expected part of the university experience from day one. First-year students represent the largest single group of respondents and the stage at which career development intervention has the greatest developmental impact. This single structural change would also substantially increase the effectiveness of every other access pathway: classroom visits, faculty integrations, and peer mentorship all land differently when Horizons is already waiting for the student in Brightspace.

Recommendation 2: Expand and formalize the embedding of Horizons across multiple access points

Career development knowledge and resources should not require students to find their way to a single door. The evidence in this dataset reflects the diversity of ways students currently encounter Horizons: through self-directed enrollment, through CDEL delivering career development content in classrooms, through professors and departments integrating modules into graded coursework, and through in-person engagement at Career Corner. Each pathway reaches a different student. Together they begin to approximate what an equitable access architecture looks like. Formalizing and expanding this multi-access approach, through automatic enrollment, continued classroom delivery, support for professors integrating Horizons into course assessments, and sustained investment in the in-person relational environment of Career Corner, would ensure that career development is accessible regardless of program, year, language, or background. For students from equity-deserving communities, multiple access points are not a convenience. They are the difference between reaching the program and not.

Recommendation 3: Protect and invest in the relational infrastructure that makes Horizons developmentally effective

The evidence in this report is unambiguous: the deepest developmental gains are produced through sustained human interaction within the stable, trusted environment of Career Corner. Horizons functions most effectively as preparation for and complement to the human relationships that make career development theory operational. Students do not develop confidence, identity, and agency through program completion alone. They develop these capacities through iterative, guided interaction with peer mentors, staff, and counsellors who provide interpretation, challenge, encouragement, and accountability over time. Fragmenting or virtualizing this environment does not simply change the mode of delivery. It removes the mechanism of change.

CDEL's relational model is also a strategic one. The continuum of support, from self-directed digital engagement through facilitated peer programming to individualized counselling, directs students toward the level of intervention that matches their need, maximizing impact across a large and diverse student population within real resource constraints. The physical space is what makes this continuum possible: it is where conversations accumulate, where students return, and where the community that drives developmental outcomes is built and sustained. As Horizons grows through universal access and deeper institutional embedding, investment in staff capacity, peer mentorship, professional counselling, and the Career Corner space itself is what will ensure that growth translates into developmental outcomes rather than simply into participation numbers.

7. Conclusion

The 112 student responses analyzed in this report tell a coherent and theoretically grounded story. Students who engage with the Horizons Career Development Program describe developmental gains that map directly onto CDEL's five Career Development Learning Outcomes – growth in self-awareness and self-concept, the construction of a clearer career identity, the development of confidence and willingness to act, improved capacity to navigate uncertainty, and practical skills literacy – and the program-level objective they build toward: emerging career agency. These are not incidental outcomes of a well-liked program. They are the predicted results of a theoretically grounded intervention, confirmed in student voice.

The analysis also surfaces a finding with direct institutional consequence. The developmental outcomes students describe are most fully realized through sustained, relational engagement within the stable environment of Career Corner. Horizons is an intentionally designed program whose interactive activities, quizzes, digital badges, certificates, and Career Readiness Quiz actively engage students and build a tangible record of their development. But Horizons functions most effectively as preparation for and complement to the human relationships and physical space that make career development theory operational. Students develop confidence, identity, and agency through iterative, guided interaction with peers, peer mentors, staff, and counsellors who provide interpretation, challenge, encouragement, and accountability over time.

This finding has particular urgency for students from equity-deserving communities, for whom the relational model of Career Corner provides access to developmental conditions that are otherwise unavailable. That model is strategic as well as relational: CDEL deliberately directs students toward the level of support that matches their need, with professional counsellors anchoring the most intensive interventions and facilitated peer exchanges extending the community of development to scale. A

program that requires self-direction before it builds self-direction will reproduce the inequities it is designed to reduce. The recommendations in this report address this directly: through universal access, multiple embedding pathways, and sustained investment in the people and place that the evidence identifies as the mechanism of change.

The institutional moment makes this evidence especially timely. uOttawa has committed to a major revitalization of curricula and pedagogy with experiential learning at its centre, to improving the student experience, and to building an inclusive environment in which every student can succeed. The students in this dataset are describing exactly the kind of engaged, purposeful, and supported experience the institution is seeking to produce at scale. Horizons is already delivering it for the students who find their way there. Build Your Future is the architecture that makes it universally accessible: a visible, progressive framework connecting the career development preparation Horizons produces to the experiential learning participation that consolidates it.

This report represents the qualitative layer of CDEL's evidence base for Horizons. Its quantitative companion, the companion quantitative analysis (Mitsou, 2026c), documents program reach, multi-year companion engagement, and pre/post readiness gains on the Career Readiness Quiz across the full population of students who have engaged with Horizons since launch. Together, the qualitative findings presented here and the quantitative findings presented in the companion quantitative analysis (Mitsou, 2026c) constitute a comprehensive and rigorous account of what Horizons produces, for whom, and under what conditions.

References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed.). Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Kwok, C. Y. N. (2018). Managing uncertainty in the career development of emerging adults. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 27(3), 137–149.
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., and Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79–122.
- Milot-Lapointe, F., and Arifoulline, N. (2025). A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of individual career counseling on career and mental health outcomes. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 62, 49–57.
- Mitsou, M. (2026c). *Horizons impact: A quantitative analysis of reach, engagement, and readiness*. University of Ottawa, Career Development and Experiential Learning. <https://doi.org/10.20381/xj1v-6775>
- Redekopp, D. E., and Huston, M. (2019). *Strengthening mental health through effective career development: A practitioner's guide*. CERIC.
- Savickas, M. L. (2013). Career construction theory and practice. In S. D. Brown and R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (2nd ed., pp. 147–183). Wiley.
- Super, D. E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 16(3), 282–298.



Tinto, V. (1987). Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition. University of Chicago Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press.