

News from the North: The Changing Landscape of WIL in Canada

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Abstract

This article describes why work-integrated learning (WIL) at the post-secondary level is an essential component of Canada's future economic growth. Co-operative education, while one of the most robust and well-known examples of WIL, is only one of the many ways that work experience can be incorporated into higher education's academic curricula. The article illustrates how the strategic alignment and collaboration between business, government and higher education is critical to ensure that our students graduate from post-secondary education ready and equipped to make a significant contribution to their employer as soon as they enter the workforce.

Co-operative education is a widely-known pedagogical model that integrates academic learning with work experience. In Canada, the University of Waterloo was the first school to offer the co-operative education model. Founded in 1957, co-operative education (co-op) was an essential component of the curriculum at Waterloo, connecting industry with academy through alternating paid work terms and academic terms. By the late 1970s, two decades after the Waterloo launch, Canada had 26,000 students enrolled in 50 co-op programs across 12 post-secondary institutions. By 2017, that number had increased to more than 112,000 co-op work terms across 56 post-secondary institutions. Sixty years since its launch in Cana-

da, the co-op model has been widely adopted by higher education across the nation as an integral component of its degree or diploma programs.

In 1973, the Canadian Association for Co-operative Education (CAFCE) was formed as a member organization comprised of representatives from all higher education institutions engaged in co-operative education. Its purpose was to serve as a forum through which educators could meet, share their thoughts and assist one another as co-op practitioners. This association has led the development of a common definition of co-operative education and accreditation criteria for each co-op program to ensure high quality and best practices. CAFCE has been instrumental in promoting and advocating

the value of co-operative education through dialogue with government and industry. Yet, co-operative education, while very prevalent in higher education, is but one part of the broader work-integrated learning continuum. Once again, post-secondary institutions in Canada are at the threshold of exponential growth and interest in other forms of experiential education.

This article portrays the social and economic context behind Canada's increased emphasis for work-integrated learning in higher education. The article discusses the business perspective and the government support that will enable higher education institutions to promote and integrate experiential learning within their degree or diploma programs. This article further shares how higher education institutions have come together in the evolution of CAFCE to embrace work-integrated learning.

1. Business perspective

The growing knowledge economy, the demand for innovation and disruptive technology to keep pace with global competition and an aging workforce has increased competition among employers for career-ready graduates. As a result, organizations are turning to work-integrated learning to fill the gap. We see evidence of this desire for work-ready graduates in a recent study conducted by Morneau Shepell, a human resources consulting and technology company. Based on responses from hiring managers at 95 of Canada's largest companies, the study found that 83 per cent of the companies surveyed participate in co-op programs and other forms of work-integrated learning initiatives that help them identify potential new employees. This percentage has increased from two years ago, where a similar survey indicates 76 per cent of employers said they were participating (BHER,

ca, "[Navigating Change: 2018 Business Council Skills Survey](#)").

As this report states, with Canadian companies working harder than ever to recruit and retain talent, the voice of Canadian business is advocating for a clear mandate to higher education to equip today's students with the technical and soft skills required to succeed in today's workplace. In response, business, higher education and government have partnered to collaborate and create opportunities for our students while they are in school, allowing them to gain valuable work experience in addition to academic knowledge. One example of this is the Business Higher Education Roundtable (BHER), which brings together representatives from large Canadian enterprises and higher education institutions to examine and develop a coordinated strategy. "In 2015, the Business/Higher Education Roundtable set a bold target: for 100 per cent of undergraduate students to have access to some kind of WIL prior to graduation" (BHER, ca, "[Work-Integrated Learning: Getting to 100%](#)").

The findings from the Ontario University Graduate Survey of 2014 graduates seem to support the BHER platform that work-integrated learning is a key factor in early career success. Ninety-six per cent of University of Waterloo co-op graduates surveyed said they were employed six months after graduation and worked in positions related to skills they acquired at Waterloo (compared to 74 per cent of Ontario graduates). Within the group of 96 per cent of co-op grads, 79 percent were earning \$50,000+ two years after graduation compared to 39 per cent of Ontario graduates (*Ontario University Graduate Survey of 2014 graduates*).

2. Government support

In 2016, a series of funding initiatives were launched by the Federal government and by various provincial governments to help create thousands of paid work-integrated learning opportunities for students enrolled in higher education. One such initiative was the Canadian government's Student Work Integrated Learning Program (SWILP), which allotted \$73 million to support the development of new WIL opportunities, with the intention of creating 10,000 new jobs with new employers. The SWILP program mandate is to "help post-secondary students in science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) and business programs get work experience they need to prepare for jobs in these high-demand fields" (Canada.ca, "[Student Work-Integrated Learning Program](#)").

This program is administered through a number of industry associations that serve as delivery agents that review and approve employer applications for funding to pay for students' work-integrated learning experiences.

CAFCE recently revisited its own mandate. In November 2017, some 45 years after the inception of CAFCE, members voted to formally expand their mission and mandate to represent all forms of WIL across Canada, officially becoming Co-operative Education and Work Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada). A key priority for the board is to work on creating common definitions and quality standards for all forms of WIL.

Anne Fannon, President of CEWIL Canada, explains that "WIL is more than simply connecting students and industry. It is the infrastructure that exists around the experience, helping to make it meaningful and valuable for both employer and student. Everyone at CEWIL Canada is very excited about the focus on increasing WIL. We just want to make sure that it is done with quality outcomes in mind, leveraging the expertise that exists already within the country."

Student Work-Integrated Learning Program (SWILP) at a glance

- For co-op students in science, technology, engineering, math and business programs
- Covers 50 per cent, or \$5,000, of a student's wages
- Coverage increases to 70 per cent, or \$7,000, for:
 - First-year students
 - Women in STEM fields
 - Indigenous students
 - Persons with disabilities
 - Recent immigrants (within five years)

3. Evolution of CAFCE

With the broader focus on WIL becoming an increasing priority in the Canadian government and across many post-secondary institutions,

4. Conclusion

Once again, Canada is at the threshold of change in experiential education and work-integrated learning which is inclusive of co-op-

erative education. With support from all levels of government, opportunities within growing industries and post-secondary institutions, career-ready graduates are aligned to fuel Canada's economic growth through innovation, disruption and enterprise.

“As the next generation enters the workforce, profound economic, social and technological change means that collaboration is key to unlocking our future economic potential,” says Dave McKay, President and Chief Executive Officer of RBC and leader of the Business/Higher Education Roundtable's work-integrated learning taskforce. “It takes commitment and investment to launch work-integrated learning programs, but the payoff is well worth it” (BHER.ca, [“BHER applauds federal investment in skills development”](#)).

With employers, government and post-secondary institutions across Canada, the commitment to WIL grows stronger every year. When it comes to quality post-secondary education, here in Canada we truly believe... where there's a WIL there's a way.

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