

**CEWIL CANADA | ACADEMICA GROUP**

**NAVIGATING NEW GROUND: PERSPECTIVES  
FROM CANADA'S WIL ECOSYSTEM**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Canadian work-integrated learning (WIL) ecosystem has undergone significant changes in recent years, driven by global events such as the pandemic, alongside rapid technological progress, economic and demographic shifts, and a deeper commitment to decolonization and the principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA). In light of these changes, the purpose of this study was to delve deeper into the current state of WIL in Canada, offering fresh insights from across the ecosystem.

In this report, we provide a brief overview of the WIL ecosystem in Canada, including identifying the key players and their respective roles. Within this ecosystem, we found widespread agreement that WIL helps to prepare students for the workplace, address employer talent needs, and spur innovation in the economy. We also heard that WIL plays an important role in personal development, civic engagement, and community building, and that these perspectives on WIL's purpose should not be overshadowed by the economic narrative.

In recognizing the substantial benefits of WIL, it is equally important to understand the challenges currently facing the WIL ecosystem. These challenges can be grouped into three main themes, starting with inequitable access to quality WIL experiences. This includes international students' ineligibility for Student Work Placement Program (SWPP) funding as well as broader structural inequities that create barriers for students from equity-deserving groups. The second challenge involves aligning supply and demand in the WIL ecosystem. Specifically, there is a need to increase the pool of host organizations, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to accommodate the growing number of students seeking these opportunities. The third challenge is resourcing WIL delivery given the sizable time, effort, and investment it requires of postsecondary institutions.

There are also several trends shaping the WIL landscape, including technological changes, increased flexibility in the design and delivery of WIL programs, and the expansion of quality standards beyond co-op to all forms of WIL. These trends are creating new opportunities in the WIL ecosystem, and at the same time are creating definitional tensions about what counts as "WIL". To address these tensions, work is being done to clarify differences between experiential learning and WIL, and to understand experiences based on intensity and duration.

The report ends with five calls to action intended to strengthen the WIL ecosystem:

1. Sustainable, Predictable, Inclusive WIL Funding
2. Improved Data Collection and Reporting
3. Greater Collaboration and Coordination
4. Support for SME Participation
5. Deeper Approaches to Decolonization & EDIA





## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the work-integrated learning (WIL) ecosystem in Canada has experienced significant changes, mirroring broader shifts observed across the country. The confluence of unprecedented challenges and opportunities—ranging from a global pandemic to rapid technological advancements, from dynamic economic changes to an elevated commitment to decolonization and equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA), as well as the impacts of immigration and the integration of international students—has reshaped the landscape of WIL. Furthermore, the emergence of new collaborators within the ecosystem has introduced additional layers of complexity and potential. These multifaceted changes have not only altered the way WIL is conceptualized and implemented, but have also highlighted its critical role in preparing a resilient and adaptable workforce for the future.

This study is a follow-up to our recently published report titled *Mapping the Terrain: A Synthesis of Recent Research and Future Directions*. In *Mapping the Terrain*, we summarized recent published reports and literature related to WIL in Canada. In doing so, we found that the benefits of WIL to students, host organizations, and postsecondary institutions are well documented<sup>1</sup>. There is also extensive discussion of challenges to delivering and accessing quality WIL experiences from the perspectives of postsecondary institutions, host organizations, and the students themselves. When examining recent developments within WIL, we took note of online/remote WIL opportunities, the integration of micro-credentialing and WIL, the engagement of Indigenous students and communities, adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), and the growing professionalization of WIL practitioners. We also identified gaps in our understanding, especially those that stem from a lack of data gathering and reporting structures.

To address some of the gaps in our knowledge, we engaged in primary research with organizations within the WIL ecosystem. Through this primary research, we aimed to go beyond the published reports and literature analyzed in *Mapping the Terrain* to gather current, on-the-ground perspectives of the WIL landscape. Our primary research questions were:

1. What are the key challenges facing the WIL ecosystem?
2. What trends are expected to shape the future of WIL?
3. What opportunities exist for improvement?

Together, these two reports provide a comprehensive overview of the state of WIL in Canada.

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[1] The benefits to communities, however, are less understood. This is particularly the case when it comes to the benefits of WIL to Indigenous communities as rights-bearing communities rather than as stakeholders.

## **METHOD**

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach involving interviews and surveys to gather the perspectives of diverse parties within the WIL ecosystem

### **INTERVIEWS**

In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from postsecondary institutions, student organizations, industry associations, government bodies, postsecondary sector organizations, funding delivery partners, and other organizations working in the WIL space. All participants were either directly involved in WIL-related roles or held senior positions within organizations that are part of the WIL ecosystem.

A total of 88 individuals were contacted via email, inviting them to participate in interviews lasting between 30 to 45 minutes. Ultimately, 58 individuals from 49 organizations were interviewed for this study. The interviews were conducted virtually in both English and French, and took place between November 10th, 2023 and February 6th, 2024.

With the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Direct quotes are provided throughout the report and are attributed to the individual where permission was provided. Individuals who did not want their quotes directly attributed to them are recognized as “Representatives” for their respective type of organization.

### **SURVEYS**

The interviews were complemented by two surveys, one targeting current postsecondary students and one directed to postsecondary staff involved in the administration or delivery of WIL programs. The surveys were available in English and French and were in-field from November 15 to December 17, 2023.

The sample source for the student survey was Academica’s StudentVu Panel. A total of 1,791 current postsecondary students from across Canada completed the survey. Data were weighted by gender and institution type using 2021/2022 enrolment data from the Statistics Canada Postsecondary Student Information System.

The survey of postsecondary staff was sent to CEWIL Canada’s membership list and promoted to the sector more broadly through the Academica Top Ten newsletter. In total, 280 postsecondary faculty, staff, and administrators completed the survey.

## LIMITATIONS

While our study offers significant insights into WIL across Canada, it is not without its limitations.

Due to the inability to access the full target population, both surveys rely on non-random sampling approaches. This introduces survey research biases common to non-random samples, such as self-selection and noncoverage bias. Notably, the student survey sample underrepresents Quebec and over represents British Columbia. Despite weighting the student data by gender and institution type to improve the representativeness of the results, these adjustments cannot fully bridge the gap between our sample and the Canadian postsecondary student population.

Interview-based research has its own set of limitations. While efforts were made to include a broad range of individuals and organizations with representation across roles, regions, institution types, and sectors, the sample may not fully capture the breadth of experiences and perspectives across the entire WIL ecosystem. For example, employer or industry organizations are significantly more represented than individual host organizations. This disparity may impact the study's insights into direct host organization experiences and challenges. The study results need to be interpreted with an awareness of these constraints.

Finally, it is important to note that “WIL” is a broad umbrella term. The benefits, challenges, and trends we discuss do not apply equally to all forms of WIL, or across all industries, regions, or institution types. Through this report we aim to provide a high-level overview of the state of WIL in Canada, but we recognize that there is much diversity in the ecosystem worth exploring. We hope that future research will delve into many corners of the ecosystem to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding.





## UNDERSTANDING THE WIL ECOSYSTEM

There are three core groups at the centre of the WIL, whose participation is required for WIL to take place:

- **Postsecondary institutions** design and deliver WIL programs, facilitating the integration of academic learning with practical experience.
- **Students** participate in the WIL programs, gaining hands-on experience.
- **Host organizations**, which include employers as well as industry partners, not-for-profits, and community-based organizations, provide the workplace or practice setting.

Beyond these three, the federal and provincial governments play a role in developing policy and providing funding that affects WIL. Federally, there are two government ministries funding WIL activities: Women and Gender Equality and Youth (WAGE and Youth) and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED). Both ministries are focused on increasing the number of WIL opportunities available in Canada to ensure that every student who wishes to complete a WIL experience has the opportunity to do so and both provide funding that supports the WIL ecosystem, but they have slightly different focuses. WAGE and Youth's primary focus is student development, whereas ISED's primary focus is talent development for industry.

WAGE and Youth's main WIL funding programs are the Innovative Work-Integrated Learning Initiative (I-WIL), which primarily funds third parties to provide students with short, intensive, technology-enabled WIL opportunities, and the Student Work Placement Program (SWPP), which provides wage subsidies to host organizations who offer paid WIL experiences<sup>2</sup>. The SWPP program has introduced a network of 18 employer delivery partners into the WIL ecosystem. These delivery partners, representing a range of industries and sectors in Canada, work with postsecondary institutions to match students to the right placements, offer guidance and information to host organizations, and process applications for SWPP funding.

ISED's WIL funding is directed to two organizations: Mitacs and the Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER). Mitacs receives funding that supports their paid internship programs for postsecondary students and postdoctoral fellows, while BHER receives funding to create and scale WIL opportunities and develop tools and resources that support employers.

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[2] In 2022, ESDC's WIL programs were transitioned to the portfolio of the Minister for Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) and Youth. However, the programs are still delivered by ESDC so for simplicity we refer to these as ESDC programs here.

At the provincial level, funding and policies vary significantly. For example, provinces like Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec incentivize organizations to provide WIL experiences by offering tax credits. Other provinces, such as Nova Scotia and Alberta, have developed their own wage subsidy programs to help organizations provide paid WIL experiences. Numerous provinces, including British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Saskatchewan, provide funding to Mitacs for research internships.

Some provinces have also created dedicated funding to expand WIL experiences. For example, British Columbia supports WIL with dedicated funding that is focused on increasing the number of WIL opportunities in the province, while New Brunswick's initiative, Future NB / Future Wabanaki, is noteworthy for providing both capacity-building and project-based funding for experiential learning initiatives that span from early childhood education to the completion of postsecondary studies.

Provinces also influence the WIL ecosystem through their agreements with institutions, setting clear expectations for postsecondary institutions regarding the delivery of WIL opportunities. For example, in Ontario, experiential learning is identified as a priority area in the strategic mandate agreements, necessitating a discussion about how this is addressed by each institution. Ontario also mandates that all four-year degree programs offered by colleges include a minimum of 420 hours of WIL, ensuring that students gain substantial hands-on experience in their field of study. The Alberta government has urged institutions to work towards the goal of having every postsecondary program within the system have an optional WIL component for students.

Non-profit organizations such as CEWIL Canada also play a crucial role in the WIL ecosystem by providing leadership, quality standards, resources, professional development opportunities, and advocacy to support the growth and development of WIL across Canada.

At the regional level, organizations such as the Association for Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning BC/Yukon (ACE-WIL), Experiential and Work-Integrated Learning Ontario (EWO), CEWIL Atlantic, réseauAIT, and TalentED YYC provide leadership, co-ordination, and resource-sharing.

Finally, there are a number of companies in the WIL ecosystem who facilitate the delivery of WIL by offering supports—primarily software solutions—to postsecondary institutions. This includes technology platforms that help postsecondary staff to manage and track WIL experiences, facilitate job postings, and organize interview schedules, as well as tools to help prepare students for WIL opportunities with services such as virtual mock interviews and resume feedback.

In addition to these facilitators, a relatively new development within the WIL landscape is organizations funded by the federal government's I-WIL initiative that provide short, technology-enabled WIL opportunities to students such as Riipen and the Canadian Institute for Exponential Growth.

Together, the postsecondary institutions, students, host organizations, governments, advocacy groups, and related organizations form a dynamic WIL ecosystem supporting the delivery of quality WIL experiences for students in Canada.





## PERSPECTIVES ON WIL'S PURPOSE

It is difficult to engage in conversations about WIL without entering into the discussion of its overarching purpose. Many in the WIL space have given considerable thought to this question, and it is an area where productive tensions emerged.

WIL is most commonly praised for its ability to prepare students for the workplace, address employer talent needs, and spur innovation in the economy. This view was shared by many of the government representatives that we spoke to and is summarized well in the following quote:

“While I cannot speak on behalf of all provincial governments, I can offer insights into our perspective. Our province places a strong emphasis on the economy, and the value of post-secondary education is closely linked to its specific economic outcomes. Particularly, from the perspective of our government, the benefits of WIL revolve around expediting students' entry into the workforce. This, in turn, accelerates their integration into the economy, leading to the creation of jobs, increased opportunities, and support for small businesses, among other things.”

– A Provincial Government Representative

The economic argument for WIL has become dominant in many circles and has helped attract government investment. Most government representatives we spoke with were clear that their investments in WIL are driven by the economic benefits.

Participants from all parts of the ecosystem agreed that WIL serves an important role both in terms of positive career impacts for students, as well as in creating long-term economic benefits for their province and the country. Many also urged, however, that we not lose sight of WIL's role in personal development, civic engagement, and community wellness. Dr. Sarah King, Director of Experiential Education at the University of New Brunswick, advocated for the civic advantages of WIL:

“In my view, the most significant benefits of WIL are its civic advantages. We understand that students who engage in experiential learning are more likely to participate in voting, volunteer in their communities, possess a deeper awareness of local issues, and are better equipped to address global challenges. Thus, the primary advantages for students lie in forging stronger community connections and developing skills to solve major problems. [...] WIL is often presented as a universal solution to the challenges in the labour market. [...] I believe if we reframe WIL with a focus on problem-solving, we can create an even more potent educational tool. This approach should emphasize not just transferable, human, or soft skills, but specifically the civic skills that empower students to contribute meaningfully to their communities.”

- Sarah King, Director of Experiential Education, University of New Brunswick

King’s perspective underscores the role of WIL in cultivating engaged and socially responsible citizens. At Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), the goal of WIL is to help students be career ready, community ready, and citizen ready. Anita Abraham, TMU Director of Experiential Learning, emphasized that it's not an “or” between those statements. The intention is that students who participate in WIL cultivate readiness in all three of the areas.

Individuals we spoke with from Indigenous institutions and organizations pointed to WIL’s role in developing the whole person and meeting community needs. According to Rebecca Jamieson, President of Six Nations Polytechnic:

“As individuals develop through these experiences, so too does the community and territory. The benefits extend beyond the individual, enhancing the capacity and development trajectory of the community organization involved. This process is holistic, integrating individual and community growth.”

- Rebecca Jamieson, President, Six Nations Polytechnic

WIL is seen as part of a broader educational approach that focuses on community and well-being. The following quote from Marsha Josephs, Executive Director of the Indigenous Institutes Consortium, further explains this perspective:

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“In contrast to the mainstream emphasis on quickly acquiring skills for job readiness, Indigenous Institutes prioritize community, family, and self-care. Success here is viewed as contributing to these areas, rather than just pursuing personal financial gain. It's a different mindset – not just about earning a high income but about giving back and nurturing one's community. [...] In the Indigenous community, learning is a deeply embedded, continuous process. It involves being constantly aware of and understanding how various factors impact you, your family, and your community.”

- *Marsha Josephs, Executive Director, Indigenous Institutes Consortium*

”

Here, WIL is seen as having the potential to amplify the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities.

This discussion around the purpose of WIL does not aim to settle on a single “correct” approach, but to recognize the diversity of perspectives within the ecosystem. Those involved with WIL must navigate these differing views, understanding that the purpose of WIL can vary based on the audience and objectives:

“

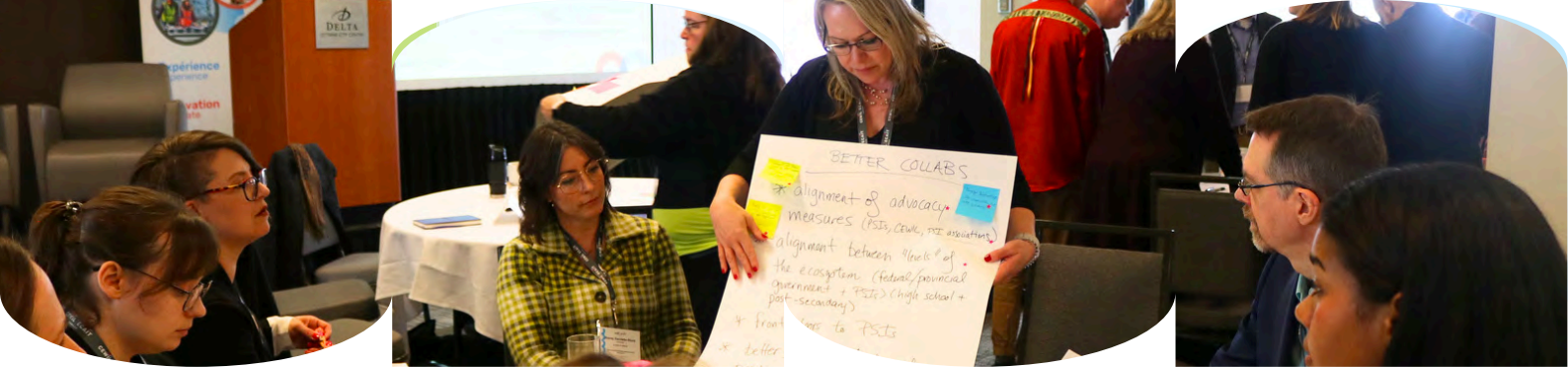
“The call on practitioners and institutions is really to do the work of self-examination and reflection on ourselves to be clear on what our intention and our purpose is to be able to deliver appropriately. Because when we all try to fit in the same box, we're not actually serving our students or our communities.”

- *Anita Abraham, Director of Experiential Learning, Toronto Metropolitan University*

”

Abraham's comments highlight the need to think critically about the ways in which WIL experiences are designed and delivered. With funding flowing to WIL that prioritizes economic benefits, the challenge is to continue to make space for multiple perspectives on the purpose of WIL, including those that focus on WIL's role in personal development, civic engagement, and community building.





## CURRENT CHALLENGES

The WIL ecosystem is currently facing three main challenges:

1. Inequitable access to quality WIL experiences
2. Balancing WIL supply and demand
3. Resourcing WIL delivery

In this section, we discuss each of these challenges and briefly touch on some of the ways in which the challenges are being addressed.

### INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY WIL EXPERIENCES

A prominent challenge identified in both the survey and the interviews was inequitable access to quality WIL experiences. While discussions often address the challenges and barriers to quality WIL for certain identities or groups in isolation, it is critical to acknowledge that these issues are not standalone. They intersect deeply with various facets of students' identities and life circumstances, ranging from cultural backgrounds to socioeconomic statuses, revealing the multifaceted and interconnected nature of the obstacles to equitable access. Nevertheless, some common challenges and barriers for particular equity-deserving<sup>3</sup> groups did emerge.

In almost every interview we conducted, funding for international students was raised as a key challenge to providing equitable access to WIL. International students are not eligible for the SWPP wage subsidy, which means that host organizations may be more willing to support domestic students in paid WIL experiences, leaving international students at a disadvantage. As an industry representative stated:

“The fact that SWPP doesn't fund international students is a significant challenge. International students already face many hurdles, such as extensive paperwork for WIL opportunities. The inability to incentivize their hiring only adds to these barriers.”

– Industry Representative

[3] The term “equity-deserving” is used in this report to refer to groups that experience collective barriers to accessing opportunities, resources, and rights. We acknowledge that there are many possible terms that could be used, such as “underrepresented”, “equity-denied”, “marginalized”, and “underserved” to name just a few. There is currently no consensus on terminology, and no single term can fully capture the barriers and harms experienced by members of these communities.

The ineligibility for SWPP funding results in job postings on WIL job boards that explicitly state international students cannot apply to the position, reducing access and engendering feelings of exclusion. This is particularly problematic given the unique benefits that quality WIL experiences can have for international students, especially those who intend to immigrate to Canada. For international students, WIL offers an opportunity to foster a deeper understanding of local job markets, improve language skills, develop professional networks, and enhance a sense of belonging and community participation.

The number of international students within the Canadian PSE system has ballooned in the last five years, growing from 291,820 in 2019 to 528,825 in 2023 (an 81% increase<sup>4</sup>). In Ontario, the growth has been even larger, with international student enrolment doubling over this same time period. The difficulties international students face in accessing WIL opportunities is a key challenge facing the system right now.

Our student survey data illustrates some of the outcomes resulting from these challenges. Almost one-in-five international students who participated in WIL indicated they could not find an appropriate placement for their field of study (18%) compared to one-in-ten domestic students (11%), and international students who participated in a co-op or internship were less likely to report being paid for a WIL experience compared to domestic students (70% vs. 83%<sup>5</sup>).

**Figure 1. Received Pay for Co-op/Internship Experience, n=278**



There was a sense among some participants that the federal government is reluctant to invest in international students due to concerns that they will not stay in Canada after graduation. The counterargument we commonly heard is that international students will be much more likely to leave if we do not offer them compelling reasons to stay. By facilitating access to jobs, social networks, and community through WIL opportunities, we enhance our ability to retain international talent. As one interviewee stated, “What better way to support community and labour market integration than by offering concrete WIL opportunities?”

[4] IRCC Study Permit Holder Data: <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8facaee>

[5] These survey results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size among specific subgroups, such as international students who participated in a co-op or internship (n=97).

Some also questioned whether the concern that international students will not stay in Canada is valid. Survey data from the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) shows that approximately 60% of international students plan to apply for permanent resident status in Canada after graduation<sup>6</sup>, and a recent Statistics Canada study showed that 58% of international students who graduated between 2010 and 2016 filed a tax return in Canada the year after they graduated (which is evidence of having stayed), and 50% did so five years after graduation<sup>7</sup>.

Even if they do not choose to stay in Canada, it was argued that international students can still enrich host organizations by bringing diverse perspectives. The reluctance to extend SWPP funding to international students may also be influenced by the federal government's concern about the overall number of international students in Canada, as evidenced by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's (IRCC) January 2024 announcement to limit study permit applications. It is worth noting that Nova Scotia has taken a very different approach, offering employers a "diversity bonus" to encourage employers to hire individuals from diverse backgrounds, including international students. Initiatives such as this are a starting point towards making WIL more inclusive and equitable.

Beyond the issue of funding, international students can also face barriers to WIL participation such as work hour limitations, and difficulties getting criminal background checks, security clearances, and work permits. This can create challenges for international students in terms of the time required to navigate these administrative processes, and lengthy processing times can cause international students to lose job offers.

For Indigenous learners, key challenges include discrimination, structural inequities in education and the workplace, and a lack of support for their unique cultural and linguistic needs, as well as the logistical difficulties of remote placements. Additionally, there is concern that some employers' interest in hosting Indigenous students for WIL opportunities might be driven more by the desire to qualify for grants or improve diversity statistics rather than a genuine commitment to providing meaningful experiences. This raises questions about the motivations behind these hiring efforts and highlights the importance of ensuring that workplaces are welcoming and supportive environments that truly benefit Indigenous learners:

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[6] CBIE. 2022. The Student Voice: National Results of the 2021 CBIE International Student Survey. [https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CBIE\\_2021\\_International\\_Student\\_Survey\\_National\\_Report.pdf](https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CBIE_2021_International_Student_Survey_National_Report.pdf)

[7] Choi, Y., Crossman, E., Hou, F. 2021. International Students as a Source of Labour Supply: Retention in their Province of Study. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2021006/article/00003-eng.htm>

“The focus should be on creating meaningful experiences that genuinely benefit the Indigenous learner. It's essential for employers to grasp the history of Indigenous people in this country. This understanding is critical, especially as workplaces aim to become more diverse. However, it's not just about diversity for its own sake. We need to ensure that these environments are free from prejudice, discrimination, and racism, as entering a hostile workplace can be detrimental to the wellbeing of Indigenous learners.”

- *Marsha Josephs, Executive Director, Indigenous Institutes Consortium*

This quote underscores the necessity of fostering not only diverse but also inclusive and respectful workplaces that actively contribute to the well-being and professional growth of Indigenous students. It calls for a shift in focus from merely fulfilling diversity quotas to deeper, more meaningful engagement with Indigenous cultures and histories.

Participants also spoke to the structural barriers experienced by students from multiple groups, including neurodiverse students, students with disabilities, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, first-generation students, LGBTQ2SIA+ students, mature learners, students with caregiving responsibilities, new immigrants, as well as students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and from racialized communities.

For example, the overall costs associated with WIL—both overt and hidden—often present significant challenges for students from equity-deserving groups. Economic challenges may drive students to juggle WIL with part-time work, potentially risking their financial stability and employment positions. Moreover, the necessity for some students to relocate for WIL adds a layer of financial strain, especially amid housing shortages occurring across the country. Participants noted that these financial burdens are not limited to the cost of relocation but also include pre-WIL expenses such as background checks, attire, equipment, and fees for co-op registration, emphasizing the systemic barriers to participation in WIL:

“Often, WIL opportunities come with various associated costs, such as fees, travel expenses, and additional resources like purchasing appropriate attire for the workplace. For example, during my time as the Vice President of Student Life in my student union, I observed through our emergency bursary program that many students sought financial assistance for travel to their WIL placements or for buying outfits required for their roles. This highlights the equity issues related to the additional costs that some students might not be able to afford, especially in unpaid positions.”

- *Wasiimah Joomun, Executive Director, Canadian Alliance of Student Associations*

Unexpected financial costs was one of the most common challenges cited by WIL students in our survey, with one-in-five saying they experienced this challenge (21%). Students who participated in a field placement or a practicum/clinical placement, which are commonly unpaid, were even more likely to say they experienced unexpected financial costs (37%).

Paid WIL opportunities are sometimes regarded as a means to offset some of the costs of WIL and enhance participation across various student groups. However, paid WIL is not regarded as a blanket solution for financial challenges associated with WIL. As D'Andre Wilson-Ihejirka, Executive Director of TalentED YYC explains:

“As an international student in Canada, I couldn't participate in paid WIL due to several factors, including limited access to work permits and a lack of networks. Unpaid WIL provided me with valuable experiences.”  
- D'Andre Wilson-Ihejirka, Executive Director, TalentED YYC

Such experiences underline the importance of a multifaceted approach to inclusivity in WIL delivery.

Several participants discussed how women, particularly those in fields where women have and are underrepresented such as STEM, can face gender-based discrimination, such as sexual harassment, during WIL placements. While institutions and organizations are working to address the problems of sexualized violence and harassment in the WIL ecosystem through programs such as the Courage to Act, other forms of gender-based discrimination remain more entrenched. For example, Catherine Bibeau Lorin, President of L'Union étudiante du Québec noted:

“At the moment there is no money for placements that are done in the fields of education, health, and social services. These fields are predominantly occupied by women. We see this as an equity issue<sup>8</sup>.”  
- Catherine Bibeau Lorin, Présidente, L'Union étudiante du Québec

In addition to gendered funding disparities, participants also discussed how women who belong to multiple equity-deserving groups experience additional barriers to participation. For instance, survey findings from CBIE reveal that international female students often lack confidence in navigating the Canadian labour market<sup>9</sup>, indicating a need for gender-sensitive program adjustments to enhance their success and address the unique challenges they face.

[8] Quote has been translated from French.

[9] CBIE. 2022. The Student Voice: National Results of the 2021 CBIE International Student Survey. [https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CBIE\\_2021\\_International\\_Student\\_Survey\\_National\\_Report.pdf](https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CBIE_2021_International_Student_Survey_National_Report.pdf)

Challenges related to institutional instructional languages, location, and academic regulations can also pose difficulties in promoting equitable access to WIL. The limited availability of WIL experiences across various program areas, such as English, Liberal Arts, Social Sciences, Veterinary Sciences, and Agriculture, represents a barrier for students in these program areas. As Annie Barrette of Universities Canada explains, “There are limited availability of WIL experiences in the humanities. And it's interesting how the skills from these kinds of programs are in high demand: transferrable skills.” Additionally, the geographic concentration of placements, particularly around major urban centers, exacerbates regional disparities in access to WIL opportunities for students and institutions alike. Furthermore, participants report that Francophone students face additional hurdles in finding placements outside of Quebec, underscoring the intersection of linguistic and regional barriers:

“The main difficulty we currently have is the mobility of students due to the cost of housing. It is very difficult for students to go and do a work term in Toronto or to go do a work term elsewhere because there are no relocation specialists and if the student has no family or no means of finding housing, that makes things much more difficult now<sup>10</sup>.”  
- Alain Tremblay, Directeur général, Université de Sherbrooke

The limited availability of WIL experiences in environments where French is spoken can also be a hurdle for Francophone students, as can the lack of resources available in both official languages for host organizations. As Annie Barrette, the Director of Policy and External Relations at Universities Canada, states “addressing gaps in communications and documentation in both official languages is crucial to avoid unfairly impacting Francophone students and those seeking French work opportunities.” These quotes reveal how various structural barriers intersect, exacerbating the difficulties encountered by students from diverse equity-deserving groups, and demonstrates the need for tailored support systems and inclusive program design.

Participants noted that a lack of awareness of and preparedness for WIL experiences stands out as a particularly pervasive challenge that especially affects first and second-year students, international students, first-generation students, newcomers, and other equity-deserving groups:

“Many students face a multitude of 'unknown unknowns.' This term refers to the lack of awareness or understanding about certain aspects of entering the workforce, such as creating an effective resume or preparing for an interview. This challenge is often more acute for students without role models, advisors, or mentors in their fields, or those from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds.”  
- Scott Stirrett, Founder & CEO, Venture for Canada

[10] Quote has been translated from French.

This lack of awareness regarding WIL extends to both the availability of WIL opportunities and their benefits, leading to a significant information gap that prevents students from timely and effective participation.

Attaining a quality WIL experience involves several layers of complexity, and while there is value in this process, the professional skillsets and knowledges needed to gain a WIL experience can raise equity concerns. Some participants note that it is the students with ample support and resources who are most able to effectively navigate these challenges. Post-COVID cohorts encounter additional hurdles, such as a deficiency in professional skills and interactions, exacerbated by remote learning experiences. Furthermore, mismatches between student expectations, program goals, host organization expectations, and available WIL opportunities further complicates the landscape.

WIL has the potential to offer unique advantages to equity-deserving groups. The establishment of professional connections is particularly important, with WIL facilitating relationships that can impact life trajectories. For individuals facing systemic employment barriers, these connections and the broader social capital that WIL provides can be a critical asset, offering pathways to overcome challenges and secure future employment opportunities:

“One aspect often overlooked in discussions about the benefits of WIL is the social capital it provides, especially when viewed through an equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility lens. This encompasses not just relationships but all the advantages that come with access. This perspective is crucial, not only for international students but also for first-generation students and immigrants. [...] WIL offers a vital pathway for students who might not otherwise have the opportunity to discover and pursue their desired careers.”

- Anita Abraham, Director of Experiential Learning, Toronto Metropolitan University

This statement highlights the transformative potential of WIL to generate social capital, emphasizing its role beyond skill and knowledge acquisition, and demonstrates the importance of ensuring all learners have equitable access to WIL opportunities.

Efforts to address equity in accessing quality WIL are gaining momentum. We heard from interviewees that inclusive, high-quality WIL is a priority, and many shared with us specific actions that their institution or organization is taking to address equity concerns, such as targeted funding, reconciliation awareness training, accommodations, and flexible approaches to WIL delivery. What is more, students themselves are becoming more vocal about communicating EDIA priorities to host organizations:

“The younger student body [...] have made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that an inclusive and equitable workspace is crucial. As a result, recruiting employers seeking WIL students have shifted their focus from just the rate of pay, benefits, or career progression. They are now emphasizing team dynamics, showcasing the quality of people students will work with, and highlighting the organization's values that ensure it's an employer of choice, where individuals can bring their authentic selves to work.”  
- Matthew Rempel, Director of Career-Integrated Learning, Sheridan College

The importance of this challenge is widely recognized, and many are actively trying to find solutions.

## BALANCING WIL SUPPLY AND DEMAND

An overarching issue in the WIL ecosystem is aligning the supply of WIL opportunities with demand. As institutions build more WIL opportunities into their curricula, spurred by calls for every student to participate in at least one WIL experience, the competition for experiences intensifies:

“One significant issue, highlighted during the pandemic but still persisting, is the mismatch between the high demand for work-integrated learning among students and the limited availability of positions. This makes it highly competitive for students to secure these opportunities, presenting an ongoing challenge in the postsecondary sector.”  
- Sarah Watts-Rynard, CEO, Polytechnics Canada

This was reinforced in the survey results, where half of postsecondary faculty, staff, and administrators (49%) indicated that finding enough experiences for students is one of the most significant challenges they face. As more institutions create WIL programs and more students choose to participate, more host organizations are needed to accommodate this larger volume of students.

It was widely recognized among those interviewed that meeting the growing demand for WIL opportunities will require greater involvement among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These businesses, which are defined as having fewer than 500 employees, make up approximately 98% of all employer businesses in Canada and employ about 85% of the labour force<sup>11</sup>. While SMEs play a critical role in the Canadian economy, they face unique challenges to participating in WIL programs:

[11] <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220302/dq220302b-eng.htm>

“SMEs often lack large human resources departments or a wide pool of potential mentors and require specific support to bridge the gap and leverage their potential in accessing and nurturing upcoming talent. This is crucial because SMEs play a significant role in driving large parts of our economy.”  
- Heather McIntosh, Associate Director, Education & Skills, The Conference Board of Canada

Lacking the robust human resources departments and talent acquisition teams of their larger counterparts and confronted with the complexity involved in navigating WIL funding, as well as finding the right fit among numerous postsecondary programs and institutions, can prevent SMEs from hosting WIL students. It was noted that many postsecondary institutions have a decentralized WIL model, which can mean that an employer can get directed from one faculty, school, or program to another. For companies with less capacity and resources, navigating this web can be difficult.

Addressing this challenge is important not only for increasing the number of available WIL opportunities in Canada, but also because SMEs stand to have substantial gains from greater involvement with WIL:

“[WIL] offers a strong social return by aiding businesses in accessing talent, facilitating growth, and addressing labour market needs, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).”  
- Scott Stirrett, Founder & CEO, Venture for Canada

The access to emerging talent and new ideas can have both immediate operational benefits and longer-term strategic advantages. Given the outsized benefits that SMEs can experience from participating in WIL programs, enhancing support and reducing barriers for their involvement is a key policy issue in the ecosystem right now.

While the challenges facing SMEs were more widely discussed, it is important to note that many of these challenges are similarly experienced by non-profit organizations. Non-profit organizations often have relatively small teams and limited funding, making it difficult to navigate funding, build relationships with postsecondary institutions, and offer students effective supervision and mentorship.

WIL can significantly support non-profit organizations by enhancing their operations and developing talent, making it important to find ways to facilitate their participation.

One issue that surfaced was the lack of coordination among SWPP delivery partners. The SWPP delivery partner model has several benefits; however one unintended consequence has been that it requires host organizations to determine which delivery partner to approach, which can add to the complexity. While employers in certain industries may easily identify the right delivery partner for accessing SWPP funding, others might find several partners applicable to their situation, each with its own funding application process. This can cause confusion for employers:

“An employer can apply through one delivery partner’s portal and qualify, but then find out that they have run out of funding. They then have to go to another portal where they potentially ask different questions. It’s all the same contract from government, but they all run them slightly differently.”  
- Robert Wooden, Director of Management Career Services, Dalhousie University

Another obstacle to expanding quality WIL opportunities lies in the misalignment between the cycles of industry, education, and government. Industry needs can change rapidly, while academic programs and government funding programs often operate on fixed schedules, leading to inefficiencies in matching the supply of WIL experiences with demand. This is particularly the case when the funding in question is time limited. This misalignment complicates the process of securing timely and relevant opportunities for students.

“One notable barrier is the misalignment of government timelines and funding schedules with academic terms. For instance, we are currently in the winter semester for the SWPP, which runs from January to the end of April. However, funding ceases on March 31st. This misalignment raises questions about program continuity and highlights the need for government programs to adjust policies and timelines to better serve their intended beneficiaries.”  
- Industry Representative

Aligning academic calendars and business cycles comes with additional challenges. Interviewees noted that a host organization’s busiest time of year and/or staffing availability often does not align well with the timing of WIL offerings. The overarching issue is summarized well by Rob Henderson, CEO and President of BioTalent Canada:

“The mismatch between government funding cycles, academic calendars, and industry demands poses a challenge. Government funding is typically aligned with the fiscal year, while academic and industry schedules vary, leading to inefficiencies.”  
- Rob Henderson, CEO and President, BioTalent Canada

Harmonizing these varied schedules will be crucial for increasing the number of WIL opportunities.

Rural and remote areas present their own set of challenges to increasing the availability of WIL experiences. Geographic isolation and limited local industry presence can restrict students' access to opportunities, particularly in fields of study where industry is more concentrated in urban centres:

“In our rural setting, one of the most significant challenges students encounter is finding a host for their WIL experience. Many potential placements, especially in environmental studies, are with government or tech industries. However, our outreach has been limited as our program is in its infancy, leaving students without the opportunity to explore these options fully.”

- *Postsecondary Institution Representative*

Other industries, such as agriculture or mining, may predominantly have host organizations that are located in rural areas and experience difficulty attracting students to fill WIL positions. These are just some of the unique challenges experienced by students, postsecondary institutions, and host organizations located in rural and remote communities.

While most interviewees spoke to the challenges involved in increasing the number of host organizations offering WIL opportunities, some faced the opposite challenge: Employer demand that far exceeded the number of available students. For example, the biotech sector was said to be reporting a shortage of students for available WIL positions. Having enough funding to meet the needs of all employers who want to offer a paid co-op or internship can also be a challenge:

“There is a significant demand from employers for us to supply them with students for work experiences, internships, co-ops, and more, surpassing what we can offer with our limited funding resources. We strongly believe in providing remunerated experiences for our students. Therefore, it can be challenging for us to provide provincial FutureNB funding to as many positions as employers may desire.”

- *Clara Santacruz, Manager of Experiential Learning and Career Development, St. Thomas University*

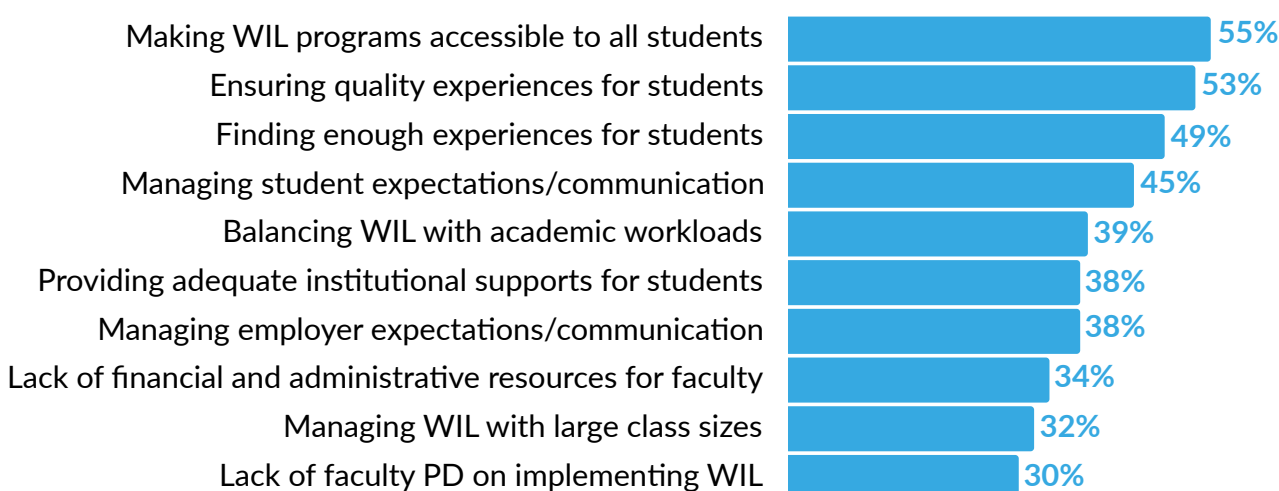
Addressing the imbalance between student availability and employer demand is a critical challenge to increasing WIL participation.

Those within the WIL ecosystem are actively seeking solutions to the imbalance between the supply of and demand for WIL opportunities. For example, we heard from postsecondary institutions that are experimenting with flexible timing for WIL programs, including onboarding students earlier or adjusting schedules to fit businesses busiest periods. Additionally, funding delivery partners are customizing their approaches to meet the specific needs of employers across different regions and industries. Tailored approaches are also being developed by BHER for SMEs to provide them with the necessary resources and guidance to participate in WIL programs.

## RESOURCING WIL DELIVERY

Designing and delivering quality WIL experiences is a resource-intensive endeavor that demands substantial time, effort, and financial investment. This makes scaling these programs to accommodate student demand and government directives a complex issue.

Figure 2. Top 10 Challenges to Delivering WIL According to PSE Staff, n=282



Postsecondary institutions are often delivering WIL programs across various fields of study and working with different groups of students and economic sectors:

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“Practitioners in postsecondary institutions face immense complexity. They are tasked with providing WIL opportunities across various programs, each catering to different student groups, occupations, economic sectors, and regions. This requires a nuanced approach to match the available supports with the specific needs of each student, especially for those who face additional barriers. The coordination of these efforts involves navigating an intricate landscape of federal and provincial programs, initiatives at the school level, local and municipal activities, and the diverse array of employers involved.”

– Sarah Watts-Rynard, CEO, Polytechnics Canada

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Postsecondary institutions also have to navigate legal, ethical, and logistical challenges, and balance the expectations of students and host organizations. Moreover, the need for faculty training and support, coupled with the challenge of aligning WIL with industry and government timelines, adds additional layers of complexity. In the wake of these competing demands and expectations, many of the postsecondary institutions we spoke with indicated that a key challenge they are facing is having inadequate resources to grow their WIL programs.

Developing and maintaining relationships with host organizations is one of the most resource-intensive aspects of delivering WIL programs, and building enough relationships to meet growing student demand can be a struggle:

“Building external partnerships, especially for faculty or staff involved in industry and community projects, applied research, and placements demands significant effort and time. It involves establishing and nurturing relationships with these partners. This can be a more time-consuming aspect of creating quality WIL”

- Amanda Malkiewich, Director of Co-operative Education & Experiential Learning, Mohawk College

Nurturing these relationships requires dedicated time to coordinate these efforts, manage logistics, and ensure alignment between academic programs and industry expectations. Additionally, building and maintaining these partnerships often entails hosting events, workshops, and meetings, all of which consume both time and financial resources.

Difficulties engaging faculty in the delivery of WIL experiences can also hinder the ability of postsecondary institutions to provide WIL. While some faculty may resist WIL because of its ties to economic priorities, many recognize its value. However, academic demands and workload pressures often prevent faculty from engaging in WIL delivery. In our survey of postsecondary staff, faculty, and administrators, 38% of respondents indicated that balancing WIL with academic workloads was a significant challenge to implementing WIL. Lack of institutional service recognition for WIL activities (29%) and lack of recognition for WIL activities in promotion decisions (26%) were also seen as challenges. As one survey respondent explained, “It can be difficult to engage faculty in WIL opportunities if it is not incentivized or mandated as part of their teaching responsibilities.” Charlene Marion, the Executive Director of CEWIL Canada further summarizes the challenge and suggests a path forward:

“Faculty buy-in for WIL continues to be a challenge at many PSIs in the country. This is particularly true when creating WIL opportunities in a course is not explicitly tied to tenure and promotions. More work to include WIL components in teaching evaluations, research and community service is needed if PSIs want to encourage more WIL on their campuses.”  
- Charlene Marion, Executive Director, CEWIL Canada

Without clear incentives or requirements, faculty engagement in WIL is likely to continue to affect the ability of postsecondary institutions to offer comprehensive WIL programs.

Changes in student demographics and labour market dynamics in recent years were also said to contribute to the challenge of resourcing WIL delivery. WIL practitioners at postsecondary institutions have had to constantly adapt to the changes, a process that requires high and constant effort:

“We've witnessed constant changes in various job markets over the past three to four years, and we're continually trying to adapt. Our program coordinators maintain relationships with employers and are dealing with evolving student demographics, which can be quite challenging. They must also adhere to certain rules such as full-time requirements while assisting students who are facing difficulties. Additionally, they are at the forefront of understanding the dynamics of the job market and various industries, allowing us to respond promptly, given our four-month timelines.”  
- Sara Baptiste-Brown, Manager, Institute for Cooperative Education, Concordia University

This adaptability is crucial for ensuring that WIL programs remain relevant and effective in preparing students for the workforce. WIL practitioners have to be well-versed in both educational and industry trends, necessitating ongoing professional development and strategic planning.

At some institutions, responsibility for WIL programs is spread across a number of different departments. This division can lead to confusion and inefficiencies in managing WIL initiatives. A representative from NSCC explains how this can be a challenge:

“A challenge that we face is the dispersed model of work-integrated learning. This model spreads across multiple domains within the institution. It encompasses curriculum development, student services, and support for faculty through centers for teaching and learning. While each domain plays a crucial role in delivering work-integrated learning, the complexity arises in determining ownership, responsibilities, and coordination among these distinct silos.”  
- Jessica Isenor, Manager of Career & Employment, Nova Scotia Community College

The silos that often exist within postsecondary institutions can make it difficult to scale WIL programs and provide a cohesive experience for students and host organizations.

Many of these challenges are particularly pronounced for smaller postsecondary institutions. With limited resources and infrastructure, it is difficult to support students effectively, engage with academic programs, and build meaningful relationships with host organizations. One issue highlighted by a WIL practitioner is the intensive nature of providing personalized support to students:

“Students often desire more one-on-one and personalized support, which can be challenging for smaller institutions like ours to provide given our limited staff. Providing one-on-one support can be very time-consuming, but it's a valuable service.”  
- Clara Santacruz, Manager of Experiential Learning and Career Development, St. Thomas University

This statement underscores the struggle small institutions face to provide the level of support that students expect or require. When there is high demand for WIL and limited resources available for program administration and development, this can pose significant obstacles. Institutions benefit from senior leadership buy-in and a strategic institutional commitment to WIL to ensure it is resourced appropriately.

Indigenous Institutes also face unique challenges in offering WIL programs due to their specific context and the scarcity of resources. As Marsha Josephs points out:

“At Indigenous Institutes, the resource requirements to develop these programs are substantial. We do not receive funding for program development, which adds to our challenges. Staff members at an Indigenous Institute often wear multiple hats, sometimes performing the roles of three or four people due to limited resources.”  
- Marsha Josephs, Executive Director, Indigenous Institutes Consortium

These challenges highlight the broader issue of funding for WIL programs. As WIL programs grow, they require dedicated staff to operate effectively. The importance of financial support for the sustainability and effectiveness of WIL initiatives is emphasized by Brian Train:

“For a comprehensive institutional service, dedicated staff is essential. This requires funding. With adequate funding, you can hire dedicated personnel who focus on building employer relationships and ensuring curriculum relevance. They act as a bridge between the faculty and the job market, and importantly, they advocate for work integrated learning within the institution, especially during budget allocations. Hence, funding is the lifeblood of these programs.”

- Brian Train, Education Officer, B.C. Ministry of PSE and Future Skills

Robust funding is crucial for hiring staff who can increase the number of WIL opportunities, enhancing WIL delivery and ensuring its alignment with industry and community needs.

Such funding becomes all the more crucial when considering the need to address EDIA concerns in the WIL ecosystem. Students with mental health issues, for example, were one of the many student groups that interviewees noted required additional resources and supports:

“Today's students face more mental health issues. Supporting students within the classroom is one thing, but providing support both inside and outside the classroom, especially in the workplace, introduces additional complexities and risks.”

- Cara Krezek, Past-President CEWIL Canada & Chief Purpose Officer & Founder at the Talent Strategy Collective

To better engage equity-deserving groups, participants shared that the ability and willingness to try and test new approaches to WIL delivery is vital. To engage in such innovative practices, however, requires financial and personnel resources that are not accessible for all institutions.

There are a variety of strategies that have been deployed to address the challenges of resourcing WIL in postsecondary institutions. Key initiatives include lobbying for increased government funding and enhanced data collection and analysis to inform policy and practice. Moreover, the creation of dedicated WIL offices and roles within postsecondary institutions aims to address some of the resourcing challenges by alleviating faculty burdens and improving WIL program delivery.





## TRENDS SHAPING WIL IN CANADA

In this section, we summarize three trends that are influencing the Canadian WIL landscape:

1. Navigating Technological Change
2. Flexibility in WIL Design and Delivery
3. Expansion of Quality Standards

Additionally, we outline emerging trends and conclude with a note on the definitional tensions that the overall trends are creating within the WIL ecosystem.

### NAVIGATING TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

Technology is advancing at a rapid pace. New tools and innovations are emerging every day, changing how we learn and work and impacting the WIL landscape in many ways. Many of the interviewees shared that they had been thinking about the implications of technologies like AI on both industry and the future of postsecondary education more broadly, and how WIL may become even more important in this context. For example, keeping academic curricula up to date with rapid industry and community changes is a significant challenge, but WIL offers a way for students to gather industry-relevant knowledge and experiences that they can bring back to their institutions:

“Our institution, a place of learning, significantly benefits from the feedback loop created by our learners' experiences. When we receive feedback from their activities, it informs us about the relevance of our offerings, allowing us to make necessary adjustments. This feedback loop keeps us attuned to the community's needs, encouraging us to inquire about their future requirements to foster an integrated approach to learning. Consequently, our relevance as an institution is maintained, ensuring we do not offer programs merely for the sake of revenue generation. Programs must serve a clear purpose; otherwise, we choose not to offer them. Our existence is not about merely increasing student numbers or institutional revenue; we are dedicated to community capacity development.”

- Rebecca Jamieson, President, Six Nations Polytechnic

Further, some believe that as AI tools foster more engaging, personalized learning experiences, WIL and other forms of experiential education will become vital to the sustainability of postsecondary institutions. By offering unique learning experiences through WIL, institutions can distinguish themselves from online alternatives.

At the same time, technological advances are also challenging WIL practitioners to think about how WIL programs are keeping pace with the changes. In the face of growing uncertainty about what the future of work will look like, WIL practitioners are focusing less on the development of job-specific skills and more on how to help students develop the skills needed to navigate their lives and careers moving forward. Norah McRae, the Associate Provost Co-operative and Experiential Education at the University of Waterloo, explains:

“The ultimate goal isn't just getting a job or employability; it's about the development of capabilities that hold value in various contexts, with employability being one of them. When we consider the future of work, questions arise about the nature of jobs, employers, and the potential influence of AI-driven systems. While the future remains uncertain, these capabilities are what we believe will equip students with a range of holistic skills, talents, perspectives, and mindsets to navigate whatever challenges come their way.”  
- Norah McRae, Associate Provost, Co-operative and Experiential Education, University of Waterloo

AI also poses a risk to the viability of WIL programs if it is implemented to complete the work that would otherwise be completed by WIL students. If there is an AI tool that can perform the work that would typically be assigned to a WIL student, why would a host organization hire a student to do it? Mitigating this risk will require intentional effort to articulate the importance of building the talent pool. As McRae states:

“You can't simply replace it all with a tool, some kind of open AI system, and then wonder five years later why you have no one in your talent pipeline.”  
- Norah McRae, Associate Provost, Co-operative and Experiential Education, University of Waterloo

Technological advancements are also raising concerns about security. As students engage in remote work or become increasingly comfortable with AI-tools, there is the risk of a company's intellectual property being shared:

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“One major concern for organizations, especially with remote work, is ensuring security. As students are increasingly skilled in using AI, there’s a risk of company-specific information being inadvertently shared outside the organization through AI-assisted tasks. This challenge might be difficult to tackle in the short term, although I believe solutions will emerge eventually. In the meantime, this transition period could pose significant management issues for companies, potentially impacting their participation and raising concerns about intellectual property.”

- *Matthew Foss, VP Research & Public Policy, Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business*

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As Foss notes above, companies may be hesitant to host students given security concerns if the risks are not appropriately mitigated. This creates a new opportunity and responsibility for postsecondary institutions: Institutional teams will need to guide students in how to use new technologies and tools safely, without putting themselves or their organizations at risk. Several institutions are responding to this matter by developing educational resources that educate students about responsible AI use before they begin a WIL experience.

Another way technology is impacting the WIL landscape is through the increasing adoption of technological solutions by institutions to expand and enhance WIL programs. As Dario Guescini, Dean of Seneca Works and President of EWO explains:

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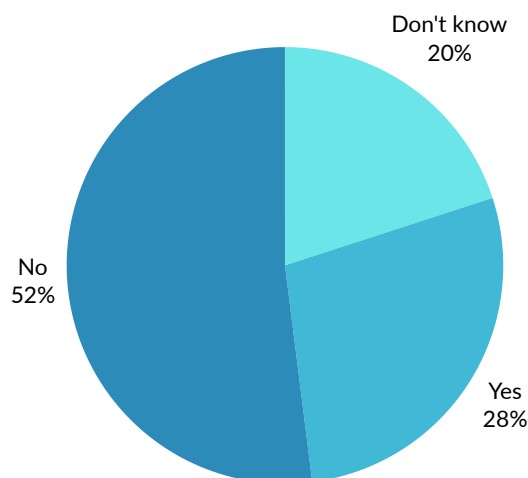
“The potential of leveraging AI and technology to prepare students for the workforce and enhance their skills development is significant. These tools can simulate real-world scenarios and offer valuable skill-building opportunities.”

- *Dario Guescini, Dean of Seneca Works and President of Experiential and Work-Integrated Learning Ontario*

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Examples of how these tools are being leveraged include the implementation of AI-powered platforms for mock interviews that allow students to practice their interview skills and build confidence, and simulated work environments that help students practice their communication skills in a professional setting without fear of judgement. In our survey of postsecondary staff, faculty, and administrators only 28% of respondents said that their institution uses AI to support WIL activities. The most common application was for resume and cover letter development.

Figure 3. Is your institution currently using any type of artificial intelligence to support WIL activities? PSE Staff, n = 282



There are also platforms like Riipen that use technology to support postsecondary institutions in the delivery of WIL, specifically by helping faculty members incorporate project-based experiences into their curriculum. Dana Stephenson, Co-Founder and CEO of Riipen, states that this approach requires collaboration with WIL offices as they play a vital role in tailoring the experience to the unique needs of each region and institution, and has “transformed project-based experiences from a scarce to an abundant resource, oversupplying this side of the ecosystem.”

Additionally, institutions are considering how to incorporate extended reality technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR), into WIL programs to prepare students for complex and challenging situations. For example, Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) has developed a platform called Virtu-WIL to provide virtual simulations<sup>12</sup> for healthcare education:

“We created virtual simulations for various healthcare fields, and it's been a game-changer. Even as things return to normal, it continues to benefit students, especially those in rural areas who face long commutes to their institutions. They can now train and practice virtually, reserving campus visits for testing and credentials. We believe this innovation has immense potential for further development.”  
- Johnathan Rix, Senior Policy Advisor, CICan

As alluded to in the quote above, there is also enthusiasm in the ecosystem about how technology can be leveraged to create greater access to WIL opportunities. Given the challenges described in the *Inequitable Access to Quality WIL Experiences* section of this report, technology is seen to have potential for addressing barriers experienced by equity-deserving groups:

[12] The platform contains virtual simulations that can be run on a computer as well as some that require a virtual reality headset.

“Considering the possibilities of emerging technologies like virtual reality and artificial intelligence, along with advancements in internet connectivity like Starlink satellite internet, we can explore new ways to offer rich, engaging WIL opportunities to remote or marginalized communities. We must acknowledge that the ideal WIL experience may vary for different populations. For instance, people with physical disabilities or those juggling multiple responsibilities might find it challenging to participate in traditional in-person WIL. It is essential to approach WIL with a holistic perspective, considering the diverse needs and situations of all potential participants. We should utilize technologies to broaden access and ensure that WIL benefits everyone, not just those who fit the conventional mold. Ultimately, leveraging these tools and opportunities can lead to better career outcomes for a broader range of individuals.”

- Heather McIntosh, Associate Director, Education & Skills, The Conference Board of Canada

This view is echoed by Charles Milliard, président-directeur général of the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ), who noted, “In a country like Canada, and in Quebec, we should have equal opportunities for access to on-the-job training. The issue is then the size of the territory that creates an inequity. But at the same time, with the advent of hybrid work and digital solutions, it is mitigating the problem<sup>13</sup>.” Another example of how technology can be leveraged to provide greater access to WIL was provided by Krista Pawley, Co-founder of Wavemakers, who shared the following anecdote about a students’ experience with Wavemaker’s virtual program:

“One memorable feedback from our program was from a young woman with a disability who expressed that for the first time, she felt recognized for her abilities rather than her disability.”

- Krista Pawley, Co-founder of Wavemakers

While many spoke to the potential of technology to be leveraged within the delivery of WIL programs, there was a sense that it is not currently being leveraged to the extent it could be. There were also concern that some students lack access to the devices and stable, reliable internet that is required for virtual WIL experiences.

## **FLEXIBILITY IN WIL DESIGN & DELIVERY**

There was widespread agreement that a key trend in the WIL landscape is the increasing flexibility in WIL programs. This flexibility was spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly accelerated the integration of technology into WIL as institutions, students, host organizations, and funders pivoted to online delivery to maintain WIL experiences during lockdowns.

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[13] Quote has been translated from French.

Coming out of this period, there has been what Wasiimah Joomun, the Executive Director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, refers to as a “rapid diversification of WIL opportunities.” Providing further context, she states:

“Traditional models like co-ops and work placements are now complemented by virtual projects, micro-placements, and virtual competitions, reflecting a shift towards hybrid or fully remote models. This expansion signifies an adaptation to post-pandemic realities.”  
- Wasiimah Joomun, Executive Director, Canadian Alliance of Student Associations

Moving beyond the initial emergency measures, intentional online, virtual, and hybrid models have been developed that can create more flexibility for students and host organizations.

The University of Waterloo’s Work-Learn Institute has conducted research on student preferences related to work arrangements and found a strong preference for hybrid models over working either entirely remotely or entirely in person. Institutions are responding to this preference, but it requires institutions and host organizations to think through how to best support students in these environments and ensure they are getting the full benefits of participating in a WIL experience:

“This preference raises challenges. When you're only at a place for four months, how do you learn about the organization? How do you make connections, which are crucial for success during a work term? Your colleagues and teammates play a significant role. Managing this in a hybrid setting requires higher levels of interpersonal skills and metacognitive skills, being thoughtful about interactions, which is a level of maturity that many students may not initially possess. So, how do you support junior-level students in developing these skills? Even as experienced professionals with workplace relationships, we can see how challenging remote work can be.”  
- Norah McRae, Associate Provost, Co-operative and Experiential Education, University of Waterloo

Among the students who responded to our survey, one-quarter of those who had participated in WIL indicated they participated in a hybrid WIL experience and another 11% had participated in a fully online WIL experience. And in our survey of postsecondary staff, faculty, and administrators, 82% said that their institution offered students the ability to complete remote/online WIL opportunities.

Figure 4. How did you participate in the WIL experience? Students Who Participated in WIL, n=667

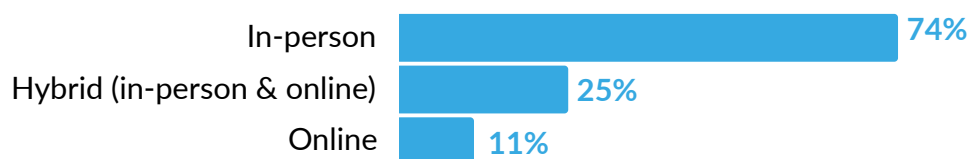
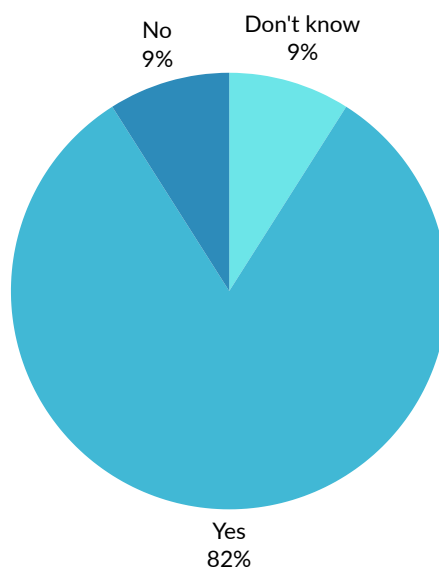


Figure 5. Does your institution currently offer students remote/online WIL opportunities? PSE Staff, n=282



Not all postsecondary institutions, however, are embracing remote WIL delivery. For some, in-person experiences are still the best fit for their learners:

“Due to the pandemic, we had to adjust our course delivery significantly, and while many workplaces have shifted towards remote work, we have not implemented remote placements for our students. They continue to attend physical locations for their placements, allowing them to fully experience and transition into the work environment. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding and engagement with their field of study, which we believe is crucial for their professional development. As of now, remote placements have not been part of our strategy.”  
- President Rebecca Jamieson, President, Six Nations Polytechnic

Despite the growing movement towards online WIL delivery, this decision highlights the value some institutions place on the benefits of in-person interactions. Each institution is navigating these trends and making their own decisions about how to deliver WIL experiences.

The increased flexibility goes beyond the delivery of WIL experiences, to the very structure of WIL programs. WIL programs are being designed to meet students and host organizations where they are, providing multiple ways to participate. This flexibility has arisen in part due to the goal of all students having the option to participate in WIL. Creative approaches to the design of WIL programs can enable greater participation among SMEs, who tend to experience unique challenges to participation in WIL programs. For all students to have the opportunity to participate in WIL, creativity has also been needed in designing WIL programs that can be embedded in different academic programs:

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“In year-long certificate programs, students are continuously engaged in coursework, making it challenging to incorporate WIL effectively. Traditional co-op models may not be suitable in these circumstances due to the program's short duration. Thus, we need to consider lighter touch approaches for WIL integration in such programs. This raises interesting questions about how to adapt WIL to different program structures and lengths.”

- Andrew Bieler, Director of Partnerships and Experiential Learning, Business + Higher Education Roundtable

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As noted above, part of the impetus for the increasing flexibility within WIL programs has been a result of trying to find ways of offering meaningful WIL experiences within the constraints of shorter academic programs. Graduate education is another place where this flexibility is helping to provide WIL experiences to a wider range of students. The University of Waterloo is exploring how WIL can be integrated into the unique contexts of different graduate programs:

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“We're currently exploring graduate WIL in engineering, considering expansion and its implications. Within the engineering department, they offer Master of Engineering programs, which are professional and course-based. Models like co-op align well with these programs. However, we must also consider research-based master's students involved in applied research projects, as well as those seeking internships. Therefore, in the realm of graduate education, we've developed a more flexible approach that caters to the diverse types of graduate programs and motivations across academic areas and faculties, encouraging more integrated learning. This flexibility is a distinguishing factor.”

- Norah McRae, Associate Provost, Co-operative and Experiential Education, University of Waterloo

”

This reflects a broader trend towards recognizing the value of all nine forms of WIL and an openness to understanding the unique benefits that each form of WIL can provide:

“Both ACE-WIL and CEWIL have "opened the tent" to welcome not only co-op practitioners but practitioners representing other forms of WIL for a more inclusive approach, recognizing that co-op represents one of a variety of WIL experiences taking place across the post-secondary landscape. There are eight other types of WIL that also have the key elements of a high-quality WIL experience and provide a method for students to put theory into practice. This approach mirrors a substantial step in collaboration happening both within and between campuses, over the past five years.”  
- *Stephanie Greaves, President, ACE-WIL BC*

The diversity of WIL experiences encompassed within the nine forms of WIL allows postsecondary institutions, host organizations, and funders to develop niche approaches. Some governments have recognized the importance of this flexibility as well:

“In our role as government stewards, it's essential to emphasize the importance of WIL, while also allowing institutions the flexibility to implement various forms of WIL. As you're aware, there are numerous definitions and interpretations of what WIL entails, and it's crucial that it be tailored to the specific needs of students and their programs. I believe our role is to support this in many different ways, adapting to the evolving educational landscape.”  
- *Provincial Government Representative*

A government representative from another province noted that they have created an “other” category when tracking WIL activities to ensure flexibility. The key requirement to qualify as a WIL experience offered by a postsecondary institution was said to be the involvement of a host organization in a meaningful host organization-student relationship.

The move towards greater flexibility is tied to a shift away from thinking about every student having one WIL experience, to thinking about scaffolding WIL experiences. “Scaffolding” in this context refers to an intentional approach to designing WIL experiences that gradually increase in complexity and intensity, allowing students to build on their skills and knowledge:

“We see the value in a full continuum of experiences for students. It's about initiating their journey with lower-intensity, shorter experiences to foster confidence and skill-building, then progressively moving them through more intense, longer experiences as they advance in their educational pathway. However, it's not just about scaling up the intensity. It's also about identifying and filling gaps in the learning experience. The key is to meet students where they are, providing personalized learning opportunities that cater to their unique needs and help overcome specific barriers they face. We're witnessing more educational institutions adopting this intentional approach.”

- Dana Stephenson, Co-Founder and CEO, Riipen

The importance of a tailored educational approach is emphasized here, focusing on the individual progression of each student. By starting with simpler, shorter WIL experiences to build confidence and skills, educational institutions can scaffold towards more complex, longer experiences that grow students' capabilities.

An intentional approach is being used at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), where a clear understanding of desired outcomes are the foundation for designing WIL experiences. Anita Abraham, Director of Experiential Learning at TMU explains:

“At TMU, we approach experiential learning with a focus on intentional design, tailored not just to the form of WIL (whether micro, virtual, or other) but to the ultimate goals of the engagement. For instance, if the objective is introductory, scaffolding, or exposure, then certain methods may be suitable. However, for deep, meaningful, and ongoing engagement, other approaches are necessary. This differentiation underlines the importance of designing with purpose and audience in mind, beyond just achieving superficial outcomes.”

- Anita Abraham, Director of Experiential Learning, Toronto Metropolitan University

This nuanced approach aims to create WIL experiences that are meaningfully aligned with specific objectives and rooted in an understanding of student and community needs.

Greater flexibility in the design and delivery of WIL is also evidenced in a trend towards more targeted WIL approaches that aim to address specific labour market needs. This is being driven in part by government bodies recognizing WIL as a strategic tool to meet key priorities:

“There's a general shift in WIL from merely aiming to provide every student with a WIL experience to more targeted interventions. These interventions are designed to address specific talent priorities and outcome areas that are important to the government and various jurisdictions. A major focus area for us has been on net zero and green skills. Understanding how to equip entry-level talent with green skills is a significant concern for the government, and we are actively promoting initiatives in this direction.”

– Andrew Bieler, Director of Partnerships and Experiential Learning, Business + Higher Education Roundtable

This strategic alignment of educational programs with government and societal goals underscores the evolving role of WIL in not only providing benefits to students and host organizations but also contributing to broader economic objectives.

The move from broad to targeted approaches is also occurring as a way to be responsive to student identities, experiences, and needs. Some institutions are questioning one-size-fits-all approaches to WIL, and working to develop specialized strategies:

“A pivotal moment for me was the shift in societal discourse around the Black Lives Matter movement, highlighting the importance of specificity over generality. This lesson—that acknowledging and addressing specific imbalances can move the needle—needs application in our work. We must ask ourselves what distinct groups, like Indigenous or Black students, need rather than attempting a one-size-fits-all approach. This shift from a broad to a targeted strategy is crucial for genuinely scaling our work with depth and impact.”

– Anita Abraham, Director of Experiential Learning, Toronto Metropolitan University

At the core of these discussions about increased flexibility in the design and delivery of WIL is a focus on EDIA principles and a desire to better meet the diverse needs of individual learners, host organizations, postsecondary institutions, communities, industries, and government bodies.

## EXPANSION OF QUALITY STANDARDS

The third trend we see in the WIL landscape is the growing focus on quality standards for all forms of WIL. To ensure WIL experiences are beneficial and meet a high standard of educational and professional development, various partners, including educational institutions, industry partners, and government bodies, are increasingly emphasizing the development and implementation of quality standards.

As Azi Afousi, President of the College Student Alliance stated, “Ensuring proper recognition of these programs is crucial. This involves verifying that both companies and program coordinators are meeting necessary standards.” CEWIL Canada has been at the forefront of this work, advocating for and developing accreditation and quality standards that aim to enhance the quality of WIL programs across the country.

Canada has been a leader in this space, with the co-op accreditation standards being developed in 1979. The co-op accreditation standards were reviewed and revised last year through an EDIA lens to focus more on the students’ learning experience in co-op programs:

“The new revised standards emphasize a more learner-centered approach to accrediting co-op programs. This means that students are encouraged to take time for reflection and make meaning of their experiences mindfully. It's not just about meeting the minimum hours or getting paid; now, we want to ensure that students have a meaningful experience and think deeply about what it means for them. So, through co-operative education, students are gaining more than just work experience and resume building; they're also benefiting from this thoughtful approach.”

– Claudia Sperling, Director of Applied Learning, Co-operative Education & Career Services, Camosun College, and Chair, CEWIL Canada Accreditation Council

By focusing on meaningful experiences rather than just the fulfillment of requirements, these standards aim to promote co-op experiences that enhance the overall educational journey of students, equipping them with both the practical skills and the critical thinking necessary for their future lives and careers.

We heard that quality standards can serve as a reference point, helping to maintain high-quality WIL experiences even when there is internal pressure to simplify processes. They also act as a form of accountability, requiring institutions to adhere to specific criteria. Accreditation standards also help to influence broader norms in the ecosystem:

“One co-op accreditation standard is that the learner must be remunerated. Because we had practitioners wanting to run co-op programs at the highest standard possible, and because those standards dictate the learner must be compensated, it's so much more common in Canada that learners are compensated. So that tenant in accreditation that the learner must be compensated is beneficial to the learner. And it's beneficial to us to create an ecosystem in Canada where it's more common than not that students are appropriately remunerated for their work. But what got us to this point of having this ecosystem of payment for the learners is, in my opinion, accreditation.”

– Robert Wooden, Director of Management Career Services, Dalhousie University and Past-Chair of the Accreditation Council, CEWIL Canada

The final benefit noted was that the accreditation process offers institutions the chance to receive constructive feedback for improvement and allows committee members to exchange innovative ideas and practices, fostering a collaborative environment of continuous improvement.

While Canada has long had accreditation standards for co-op, the current work being done to develop quality standards for all forms of WIL is a welcome development. We heard from a WIL practitioner who emphasizes the importance of integrating Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA) into these standards:

“Currently, my focus is intensely on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA), particularly regarding what constitutes high-quality WIL through an EDIA lens. Traditional definitions of high-quality WIL emphasize components like reflection, partnerships, and relevant assessment. However, I am intrigued by the potential for establishing quality indicators deeply rooted in EDIA principles, encompassing power dynamics, relationships, agency, flexibility, identity, community context, decision-making processes, and the distribution of power.”

– Anita Abraham, Director of Experiential Learning, Toronto Metropolitan University

This perspective underscores the evolving nature of WIL quality standards, highlighting the potential to incorporate comprehensive EDIA principles. By doing so, there is the opportunity to redefine quality measures and move literature and practice into a space that deeply integrates EDIA considerations.

## EMERGING TRENDS

In addition to the trends discussed above, there were a few trends that we did not hear widely about but that we expect may become more salient in the next five years. These include embedding WIL within upskilling and reskilling programs; the impact of performance-based funding on WIL; and global WIL opportunities. We briefly explore each of these emerging trends in the sections that follow.

### Embedding WIL within Upskilling and Reskilling Programs

Upskilling and reskilling initiatives have been introduced by federal and provincial governments as part of strategies to strengthen the workforce and address evolving labour market demands. Postsecondary institutions have been responding by creating short, targeted educational experiences, often referred to as microcredentials, to fill specific gaps in skills and knowledge. As these programs evolve, questions arise about how to integrate meaningful WIL experiences within their short, flexible format.

The intersection of WIL with upskilling and reskilling initiatives was also discussed in relation to the concept of “learning-integrated work”, where the roles of education and work are reversed. Instead of students leaving their studies to gain work experience, learners continue to work full-time while engaging in part-time studies, and their professional experiences are directly drawn on to inform and enrich their academic learning. Sarah Watts-Rynard, CEO of Polytechnics Canada explains this concept:

“I’m particularly interested in the idea of learning integrated work. Given the rapid pace of change, there’s immense value for employers if they could see that the postsecondary system is focused not only on helping students secure jobs but also on recognizing and utilizing the potential of the existing workforce. Imagine if postsecondary institutions could offer theoretical training to workers in fields where new technologies, like artificial intelligence, are being introduced. This reciprocal concept of learning integrated work, places importance on professional development and continuing education.”

- Sarah Watts-Rynard, CEO, Polytechnics Canada

While WIL focuses on integrating workplace experiences into an academic framework, learning-integrated work extends this by embedding learning opportunities directly within work processes.

Matthew Rempel, Director of Career-Integrated Learning at Sheridan College shared that Sheridan is exploring ways to “bring working professionals back into higher education and leverage their real-world work experiences to enrich classroom learning. This approach serves as a proxy for having a traditional work-integrated learning experience within a shorter-term credential.” Learning-integrated work requires close collaboration between educational institutions and host organizations to align learning outcomes with work objectives, build the assessment of learning within the workflow, and develop support systems for learners to reflect on and consolidate their learning.

## WIL Indicators in Performance-Based Funding

Performance-based funding is also impacting the WIL landscape, particularly within Alberta and Ontario. The Ministry of Advanced Education in Alberta set a goal to incorporate a WIL option into all academic postsecondary programs. This goal has informed the Investment Management Agreements (IMA), which are contracts between each publicly-funded postsecondary institution and the Minister of Advanced Education. Funding Metric 1 in the 2022-2025 IMAs is the “Proportion of approved programs that offer WIL opportunities to students”. Each public postsecondary institution in Alberta must set specific goals for incremental progress towards the target of all programs having a WIL option.

In Ontario, performance-based funding is directly tied to the Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) between the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and each publicly-assisted college and university in the province. In the SMAs, “experiential learning” is one of ten performance metrics identified by the Ministry and is defined in the 2020-2025 agreements as the “number and proportion of graduates in programs, who participated in at least one course with required Experiential Learning (EL) component(s)”. Each institution has an allowable performance target that they strive to meet.

In both cases, WIL is positioned as a tool to address workforce needs; the broader purposes of WIL (e.g., personal development, transferable skills, civic engagement) are largely ignored. There is concern that this will encourage postsecondary institutions to develop WIL programs that are focused narrowly on workforce outcomes, rather than approaching WIL as part of a holistic education experience that fosters well-rounded development. Interviewees also noted that variations in the way performance-based funding WIL indicators are rolling out in Alberta and Ontario presents an opportunity for comparative policy analysis. There is a desire to understand what the differences are, why those variations exist, and how they impact the WIL ecosystem in each province.

## Global WIL Opportunities

The final emerging trend is global WIL opportunities. While engaging in WIL abroad is not new, we heard from individuals within the ecosystem who see the potential to grow the number of Canadian students who participate in a global WIL opportunity. As Dario Guescini, Dean of Seneca Works and EWO President, states: “Global WIL is an area that we need to start paying more attention to. How can we support more global opportunities? I know that we do it, but we don't do it at the scale that we should.” The unique nature of working abroad, as opposed to studying abroad, provides a powerful platform for students to develop cultural competencies and practical skills in a global context.

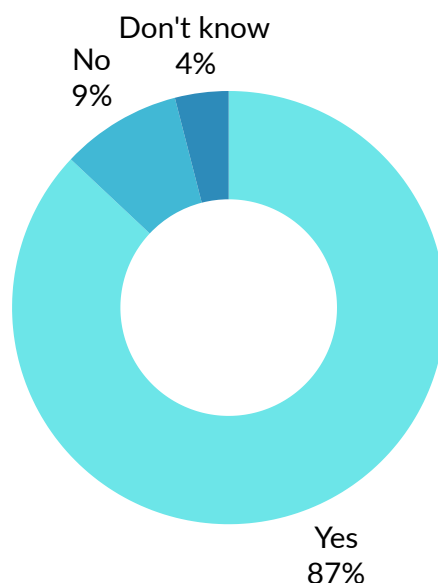
The complexity of setting up such programs, however, is significant. Institutions must navigate logistical challenges that can range from dealing with natural disasters and political instability to addressing the substantial administrative burden involved in planning and executing international experiences. To increase the number of students who have a global WIL opportunity, Canadian educational institutions must also reduce barriers for students who wish to participate. This involves not only addressing logistical and safety concerns but also addressing financial barriers and ensuring equitable access to these opportunities.

The Global Skills Opportunity program was noted as one measure the federal government has taken in recent years to support the expansion of global WIL opportunities for Canadian students. Funded by ESDC and managed jointly by CIGan and Universities Canada, this program supports both study and work abroad. The goal of the program is to increase the participation of young Canadians in international learning opportunities, and it focuses on diversifying destination countries and increasing accessibility for underrepresented students. Global Skills Opportunity is, however, a pilot program. CIGan and Universities Canada **have called** for the program to transition to a permanent program and for the funding envelope to be increased.

### A NOTE ON DEFINITIONAL TENSIONS

In *Mapping the Terrain*, we noted there is growing convergence on the CEWIL Canada definition of WIL, with many organizations adopting it verbatim or close variants of it. This was largely confirmed in our interviews, where numerous participants referenced the definition, as well as in the survey of postsecondary representatives in which 87% of respondents said that the definition is accurate. While there is convergence on this definition, there is also tension in the WIL landscape around how rigid or flexible interpretations of the definitions should be when designing WIL programs.

Figure 6. Do you believe this definition adequately represents WIL? PSE Staff, n=282



A decade ago, definitional issues were common in the WIL community but were largely focused on the desire for greater alignment in how institutions were labelling their WIL programs. For example, a single 4-month work term within a 4-year academic program was sometimes labeled a "co-op" despite not aligning with the accreditation standards. For the most part, the conversation about definitions centred on what *type* of WIL was being delivered. CEWIL Canada's efforts to develop a common language and definitions of the nine forms of WIL in both official languages clarified much of that confusion. While discrepancies still occur, they are much less common and were rarely mentioned by interviewees. The focus of definitional debates has now shifted due to newer forms of WIL that have emerged in response to calls for innovative, technology-enabled WIL experiences.

In the current funding landscape, part of the emphasis on definitions is due to concerns that the definitional boundaries of WIL are being stretched to access funding. The Canadian Alliance for Student Associations (CASA) has called for greater clarity, with their Executive Director sharing that CASA has called on the federal government to adopt a standard definition of WIL to provide clear guidance to academic institutions, host organizations, and students.

While access to funding is certainly contributing to the tensions, there are also concerns about the limited evidence available about the effectiveness of newer approaches. Given that the rationale for adopting technology-enabled forms of WIL are often framed in terms of access and equity, we heard from participants who want to ensure that they have positive outcomes for students and host organizations, and not a lesser quality experience that furthers inequities. Before these forms of WIL can be a focus for improving access, having evidence of their outcomes is warranted.

Similarly, government representatives we spoke to noted that they are interested in understanding the outcomes associated with newer forms of WIL. There is anecdotal evidence that these experiences help students who have barriers to accessing traditional WIL opportunities and that it can be used to scaffold WIL experiences, but there are questions about whether host organizations benefit. If the benefits to community or host organizations cannot be clearly articulated, it is likely that the experience is better understood as experiential learning rather than WIL. Overall, we heard that the lack of national data makes it challenging to assess the impact of these programs.

There was also a desire to ensure that all experiences labelled as WIL start from a place of deep understanding of WIL's theory and practice. Dr. Sarah King, whose academic specialization is in experiential learning, argued strongly that some of the newer forms of WIL, such as hackathons and micro-WIL, "lack key elements of WIL, such as the academic component and reflective process, making them, in my view, not true WIL experiences." The importance of these elements was also emphasized by Brian Train, Education Officer at B.C. Ministry of PSE and Future Skills, who stated: "The reflective aspect is what, in my opinion, distinguishes WIL from merely having a job related to one's studies. It's crucial that WIL is integrated into the curriculum with a conscious reflective learning process." In this view, WIL must be formally integrated into a students' academic studies and involve an academic institution, a host organization, and a student. Reflective practice, supervision, and assessment are also key features of quality WIL. This is not to say that experiences lacking these components do not have value, but definitional clarity around what constitutes a WIL experience is needed.

A few interviewees we spoke to used the term "micro-WIL" to refer to the newer, short, technology-enabled WIL experiences. "Micro" is a trendy word in postsecondary education right now, with terms such as microcredential and microlearning gaining popularity. Charlene Marion, Executive Director of CEWIL Canada argues, however, that these WIL experiences are already captured within the existing CEWIL Canada typology:

“The new and innovative forms of WIL in the ecosystem are already accounted for in the nine types of WIL offered by CEWIL Canada, and can sometimes blur the lines of quality. The definitions were intentionally constructed to be broad enough to address the differences and uniqueness of WIL program offerings across the country. Perhaps a greater understanding of the nine types of WIL and how they can be used is a necessary prerequisite for stronger consensus across partners.”

- Charlene Marion, Executive Director, CEWIL Canada

Rather than creating a new “micro-WIL” category, another approach being explored is to understand WIL experiences based on intensity and duration:

“Another perspective, which some members of the CEWIL community have been exploring, relates to the value of work-integrated learning experiences based on intensity and duration. Co-op programs, often seen as the pinnacle of work-integrated learning, typically involve full-time immersion over a few months. However, there's a spectrum where you could have longer but less intensive experiences or shorter but highly immersive ones. Each type of experience offers unique learning opportunities and should be appreciated for what they are and how they align with the curriculum.”

- *Matthew Rempel, Director of Career-Integrated Learning, Sheridan College*

This suggests the potential for identifying a range of WIL experiences within the existing typology where both the intensity and duration vary.

Some of the tension could be resolved through greater clarity among all in the ecosystem about the differences between experiential learning and WIL. As Robert Wooden at Dalhousie University succinctly stated, “all WIL is experiential learning, but not all experiential learning is WIL.” Funding for broader experiential learning initiatives could help bring greater definitional alignment as well. New Brunswick, for example, funds experiential learning rather than only WIL.

We anticipate that as new trends emerge, debates about what counts as “WIL” will continue. As these debates evolve, the following words from Anita Abraham, the Director of Experiential Learning at TMU, can help keep us all focused on what matters: “Sometimes we get so into being right or wrong that we forget about the space of what might actually lead to responding to the needs that we're seeing from our students or from our community.” While there are no easy answers to solving these definitional tensions, engaging in continued dialogue will help to move the conversation forward.





## CONCLUSION

In this report, we drew on the perspectives of individuals across the WIL ecosystem to understand current views on WIL's purpose, as well as challenges and trends that are impacting WIL in Canada. We found widespread recognition of the value of WIL, with WIL standing out for its capacity to not only align with the evolving needs of the economy but also to foster critical thinking, civic engagement, and personal growth. We also heard about challenges that the ecosystem is facing, such as inequitable access to quality WIL experiences, balancing WIL supply and demand, resourcing WIL delivery. Addressing these challenges is a current priority across the ecosystem.

At the same time, a number of trends are shaping and reshaping the landscape. This includes technological advances, increased flexibility in WIL design and delivery, and the expansion of quality standards, and the emerging area of learning integrated work. We also found a number of tensions within the WIL ecosystem. Debates around questions such as: What is the purpose of WIL? How should WIL be defined? What factors contribute to a "quality" WIL experience? Far from being detrimental, we see these debates as a sign of a healthy WIL ecosystem full of passionate and committed partners.

Throughout this study, several ideas emerged for how to continue to improve the WIL ecosystem. We summarize these below in a series of calls to actions. The calls to action are intentionally broad. We do not attempt to prescribe exactly how the calls should be implemented; working out the specifics is better left to those within the ecosystem who are far more knowledgeable about the intricacies of WIL in Canada. We offer these calls to action as a roadmap to guide the WIL community in collaboratively addressing challenges and opportunities within the ecosystem.

### **CALL TO ACTION #1: SUSTAINABLE, PREDICTABLE, INCLUSIVE WIL FUNDING**

Sustainable, predictable, and inclusive funding is central to strengthening the Canadian WIL ecosystem. Funding is crucial for supporting existing WIL programs, improving the quality of experiences, and developing new innovative WIL initiatives. This funding is not a charitable endeavour, but a strategic investment in economic development, community well-being, and maintaining Canada's position as a leader in WIL.

Having sustainable and predictable WIL funding would reduce the uncertainty that comes with 3-year funding cycles, allowing institutions and organizations to focus on long-term planning and innovation. Inclusivity in funding, particularly for international students, is a critical aspect of this call to action. Despite advocacy efforts, changes to make international students eligible for SWPP funding have yet to be realized. Including international students in the SWPP funding program would significantly enhance international students' access to quality WIL experiences, increasing their contributions to Canada's labour market and providing greater equity in the system.

### **CALL TO ACTION #2: IMPROVED DATA COLLECTION AND REPORTING**

Systematic collection, rigorous analysis, and wide dissemination of WIL-related information is needed. As we stated in *Mapping the Terrain*, “despite the wealth of experience and expertise contained within the WIL community, arriving at basic facts, such as the number of students that participate in WIL every year in Canada, requires laborious efforts to cobble together a series of imperfect sources only to arrive at an educated guess.” Our interviews conducted for this report confirmed that conclusion. Even those calling for 100% WIL participation in Canada acknowledged that we have no way of knowing when this goal has been reached. It is also important that data collection extends beyond counting WIL experiences, to focus on outcomes. The government representatives we spoke with were clear that their investments in WIL are driven by the benefits it brings to students and the economy. Being able to provide evidence of these outcomes will be important for continued investment, as well as informing on-going decisions around what types of WIL activities to fund. The measurement of outcomes, however, should not be limited to the concerns of funders. There is an opportunity to design measures that capture a full range of impacts, including personal growth, civic engagement, and community well-being. The tracking of WIL outcomes can help to assess new forms of WIL, refine program designs, align with industry and community needs, and ensure that WIL's benefits are equitably accessed by diverse student populations. We acknowledge that differences across provinces, institutions, and industries will make developing a common set of metrics across the national WIL ecosystem challenging, but it remains a worthy goal.

### **CALL TO ACTION #3: GREATER COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION**

The WIL ecosystem thrives on collaboration and coordination among partners, including postsecondary institutions, students, government bodies, host organizations, funding delivery partners, and other engaged parties. These partnerships are essential for fostering innovation, solving complex problems, and expanding the reach and effectiveness of WIL.

Despite significant achievements, there is more work to be done. For example, we heard about excellent work happening in many pockets of the WIL ecosystem, often funded with public dollars, that were not widely known. There is an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that this work is shared broadly. In addition, advocacy efforts could be better aligned across the WIL ecosystem, amplifying impact through coordinated key messages. Greater coordination also has the potential to simplify processes and lessen confusion for both students and host organizations. Collective efforts to provide more streamlined WIL processes that align academic, industry, and government cycles can help to alleviate the burden faced by host organizations and students, making it easier to navigate the complex web of federal and provincial funding and the growing diversity of WIL programs.

#### **CALL TO ACTION #4: SUPPORT SME PARTICIPATION**

Expanding quality WIL opportunities to meet the growing demand from students will require greater participation among SMEs as host organizations. SMEs employ roughly 85% of the Canadian labour force and can offer a rich learning environment for students. They also stand to gain significant benefits from WIL participation in terms of accessing emerging talent, infusing new ideas, and facilitating growth. The challenge is that they often have less capacity to navigate institutional and funding processes. Having varied structures and mechanisms that are tailored to the diverse needs of SMEs can help to facilitate their involvement. As with the other calls to action, there is already work happening in various pockets of the WIL ecosystem to support SMEs. The opportunity is to come together as a system to share learnings and failures and develop coordinated solutions that support SME participation.

#### **CALL TO ACTION #5: DEEPER APPROACHES TO DECOLONIZATION AND EDIA**

Throughout the interviews, there was a resounding call from participants for a deeper engagement with and implementation of decolonization and EDIA principles in the conception, delivery, and tracking of WIL. Several participants observed that students who would potentially benefit the most from WIL experiences face the greatest barriers to participation. There is a lot of good work happening in this space across the country, and it was clear from our discussions that building a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible WIL landscape is a priority for many. The challenge is to bring this work up to the systems level, and to go beyond thinking of EDIA in terms of access only, to engaging with concepts of identity, power, and relationship.

Inspired by the insightful words from our interviewees, we are prompted to emphasize that these calls to action should not be perceived as isolated or standalone directives. Rather, they are interconnected, each informing and reinforcing the others. For example, the pursuit of enhanced data collection and outcome tracking is enriched by integrating EDIA considerations; the advocacy for increased coordination and collaboration across the WIL ecosystem is crucial for supporting SMEs as they engage in and navigate WIL partnerships and initiatives.

Finally, we would be remiss not to end by identifying areas for future research. The lack of national data coordination calls for broad studies across institutions. Beyond well-examined co-ops and internships, other WIL forms, especially lower intensity and shorter duration WIL experiences, need deeper exploration. Additionally, understanding the experiences of SMEs and understanding how to design WIL programs rooted in EDIA principles are areas that require further investigation.



# APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

- Alain Tremblay, Directeur général, Université de Sherbrooke
- Amanda Malkiewich, Director - Co-operative Education & Experiential Learning, Mohawk College
- Andrew Bieler, Director of Partnerships and Experiential Learning, Business + Higher Education Roundtable
- Anita Abraham, Director of Experiential Learning, Toronto Metropolitan University
- Annie Barrette, Director - Policy and External Relations, Universities Canada
- Audrey Langlois, Conseillère principale - Main-d'œuvre et affaires publiques, Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec
- Azi Afousi, President, College Student Alliance
- Barb Hudkins, Experiential Learning Facilitator, MacEwan University
- Brian Train, Education Officer, B.C. Ministry of PSE and Future Skills
- Cara Krezek, Past-President CEWIL Canada & Chief Purpose Officer & Founder at the Talent Strategy Collective
- Catherine Bibeau Lorin, Présidente, L'Union étudiante du Québec
- Charles Milliar, Président-Directeur Général, Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec
- Clara Santacruz, Manager - Experiential Learning and Career Development, St. Thomas University
- Clarissa Harris, Head - Experiential Learning, New Brunswick Community College
- Claudia Sperling, Director of Applied Learning, Co-operative Education & Career Services, Camosun College, and Chair, CEWIL Canada Accreditation Council
- D'Andre Wilson-Ihejirika, TalentED YYC, Executive Director
- Dana Stephenson, Co-founder and CEO, Riipen
- Dario Guescini, Dean of Seneca Works, Seneca College
- Delaney Groves, Policy & Advocacy Lead, College Student Alliance
- Dusty Ritchie, Employment Advisor - EDC, RRC Polytechnic
- Susan McLachlan, Project Coordinator, EMC Canada
- Hayley Morgan, Senior Program Advisor - Postsecondary Education Division, Government of New Brunswick

- Heather McIntosh, Associate Director - Education & Skills, The Conference Board of Canada
- Hilary Krygsman, Process Enhancement Manager, Work Integrated Learning (WIL), Calgary Economic Development
- Jason Peng, Manager - Experiential Learning, Mohawk College
- Jessica Isenor, Manager - Career & Employment (Central Student & Career Services), Nova Scotia Community College
- Johnathan Rix, Senior Policy Advisor, CICan
- Joshua Millard, Executive Director, Alliance of BC Students
- Krista Pawley, Co-founder, Wavemakers
- Ladane Ali, Coordinator - Mentorship, International Development and Policy, Canadian Media Producers Association
- Larissa Bezo, President and CEO, Canadian Bureau for International Education
- Laurence Mallette-Léonard, Présidence de la Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec
- Marie-Josée Dionne, Directrice Stages et Emplois Chez, Polytechnique Montréal
- Marsha Josephs, Executive Director, Indigenous Institutes Consortium
- Matthew Foss, Vice President of Research and Public Policy, Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business
- Matthew Rempel, Director - Career-Integrated Learning, Sheridan College
- Norah McRae, Associate Provost - Co-operative and Experiential Education, University of Waterloo
- Phyllis MacCaullum, Program Manager - AgriTalent, Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council
- Rebecca Jamieson, President, Six Nations Polytechnic
- Rob Henderson, President and CEO, BioTalent Canada
- Robert Wooden, Director of Management Career Services, Dalhousie University and Past-Chair of the Accreditation Council, CEWIL Canada
- Sara Baptiste-Brown, MSc, Manager - Institute for Cooperative Education, Concordia University
- Sarah King, PhD, Director of Experiential Education, University of New Brunswick
- Sarah Watts-Rynard, CEO, Polytechnics Canada
- Sarolta Csete, Director - Mentorship and International Development, Canadian Media Producers Association
- Scott Stirrett, Founder & CEO, Venture for Canada

- Sebastian Panciuk, Co-Operative Education Facilitator, MacEwan University
- Shaudae Murray, Project Manager – Capacity Building, Information and Communications Technology Council
- Stephanie Greaves, President, Association of Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning
- Tresanna Hassanally, Acting Manager - Government Relations and Research Policy, CIGan
- Ramon Smits, Trucking HR Canada
- Various Government Representatives
- Wasiimah Joomun, Executive Director, Canadian Alliance of Student Associations



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