

Stakeholder Summary

High demand exists for WIL programs, but barriers still keep certain students out

Although much has been done to increase access to work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences in postsecondary education, there are still many opportunities to make WIL programs more accessible to students, argues a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

The paper, *Barriers to Work-integrated Learning Opportunities*, builds on [previous HEQCO research](#) that identified the barriers to WIL opportunities and grouped them into several categories including awareness of WIL, student expectations and institution-level strategies. The followup study examined what postsecondary institutions in Ontario are doing to mitigate those barriers.

Project Description

A total of 176 faculty and staff from 43 of the 44 public postsecondary institutions in Ontario were surveyed online in the spring of 2017. The online survey was followed by in-depth telephone interviews with 45 key informants to further clarify the findings and discuss the challenges of implementing certain strategies.

The types of WIL included in the study are: co-op, internships, applied research projects, field experience and service learning. The authors examined what had previously been identified as major barriers, examined institution-level strategies and attempted to determine best practices for postsecondary institutions that would maximize WIL participation.

Findings

Student demand for WIL opportunities is increasing and many options are often oversubscribed. However, more could be done to increase the participation of certain groups such as first-generation, Indigenous and other minority students in WIL programs.

There are a variety of WIL support programs available to students such as preparatory WIL courses, dedicated WIL advisers, seminars and group presentations, and one-on-one discussions with students. However, there is no one clear way for Ontario PSE institutions to address the challenges students face when participating in WIL and different institutions use a variety of supports and strategies.

Two factors that seem to be most important are the need for consistent messaging to manage student expectations and the need for faculty awareness of WIL opportunities to increase student participation. The survey findings suggest that having faculty champions is a very effective way to promote WIL to students. This strategy may not be widely used because of a lack of awareness about WIL within some departments and faculty reluctance to get involved.

Students may face time and financial pressures when taking part in a WIL program and resources exist to help them manage these challenges. International students and those facing physical, mental or social challenges may also encounter difficulties in participating in WIL and respondents suggested these can be addressed through a combination of WIL-specific supports (e.g., a dedicated WIL adviser, assistance with job interview preparation) and institution-wide supports (e.g., campus offices for international students or students with disabilities). WIL coordinators noted that they rely on centralized supports within their institutions to provide assistance to students, but this strategy relies on students being willing to self-identify.

While informants felt that having an overarching WIL policy is important it is “just as important to have flexibility built into the policy to allow departments to design what works best for them and for their students,” the authors conclude.

Barriers to Work-integrated Learning Opportunities is written by R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd.