

Stakeholder summary

Student survey says postsecondary co-op, internships improve employability skills

Internships, field placements, co-op and other forms of postsecondary work-integrated learning (WIL) help Ontario college and university students gain practical work experience, enhance their résumés, improve employability skills and determine their fit with a potential career, according to a new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

And while the biggest barriers to WIL participation are a reluctance to delay program completion and concerns about additional costs, the study found that nearly half of students with no WIL experience would pursue a WIL option if they could start their postsecondary education over again.

Project description

Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario's Postsecondary Sector: The Experience of Ontario Graduates is based on findings from a survey of graduating students at 13 Ontario colleges and universities, and was conducted as part of a multi-year series of studies commissioned by HEQCO. Launched in Spring 2012, the newest study analyzed survey responses from more than 10,300 graduating students from Algonquin College, Carleton University, George Brown College, Georgian College, Laurentian University, Niagara College, Sheridan College, University of Ottawa, University of Waterloo, University of Windsor, Western University, Wilfrid Laurier University and York University.

The study measured the impact of postsecondary students' workplace and volunteer experiences – including their participation in WIL – on postsecondary learning outcomes and students' overall postsecondary satisfaction, exploring the motivations, barriers, challenges and benefits associated with WIL participation.

Findings

WIL options are popular with Ontario postsecondary students, with more than two-thirds of college students and almost half of university students who participated in the survey graduating with some form of WIL experience. About one-quarter of all WIL students in the survey said they participated in more than one type of program. WIL was described as mandatory by 82 per cent of college WIL students, while half of university WIL students voluntarily chose to participate in such programs.

The study found that WIL is accessible to diverse groups of students – including visible minorities, international students and women – although first-generation students (those whose parents have no postsecondary experience) were less likely to participate in WIL programs.

Not being paid was the top challenge for both college and university WIL students and financial challenges and barriers were greater for college students than university students, according to the study. Almost all respondents reported some experience with paid employment or volunteer activities and the majority held part-time jobs while attending school.

The study also found that WIL had a greater impact than paid employment on helping students understand their career interests, influencing their career goals and increasing their confidence about future job prospects.

The findings are aligned with earlier HEQCO research on WIL with Ontario postsecondary institutions, faculty and employers. According to the [first WIL study](#), institutions and employers view work-integrated learning as an important part of the student experience, preparing students to enter the labour market with relevant, transferable and marketable skills. The [second study](#) found that faculty with WIL experience believe even more of it should be available to students and employers, while the [third study](#) noted that a key challenge is ensuring that the supply of WIL opportunities meets the demand from students, faculty and postsecondary institutions.

Further research and policy recommendations

The report recommends additional research to understand the barriers to WIL participation of first-generation students and to evaluate the effectiveness of wage subsidies that would enable more employers to compensate WIL students.

Among changes that could strengthen WIL delivery: institutions should provide clear information to students about the requirements of WIL participation and the institutional supports available, and provide greater flexibility in academic scheduling to accommodate WIL programming, says the report. Scholarships or other forms of financial assistance should be considered to support student participation in WIL programs, particularly at the college level. Universities should strengthen institutional services such as offering professional development and support to faculty interested in offering WIL programs.

Authors of Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario's Postsecondary Sector: The Experience of Ontario Graduates are Peggy Sattler and Julie Peters of Academica Group, Inc.