

## Stakeholder summary

### Employability skills enhanced in University of Waterloo professional development courses

Co-op students at the University of Waterloo who take online professional development courses to enhance their employability skills are generally positive about the value and relevance of the courses, according to a new study from the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQCO). And based on employer feedback, they also slightly outperform students who do not take the courses.

The professional development program (WatPD) was initiated in 2006 at the University of Waterloo, which established co-op education as a defining characteristic when it opened in 1957. The university has 4,500 employer partners and offers alternating terms of academic and workplace experience to more than 16,500 students in 120 academic programs, making Waterloo's the world's largest postsecondary co-op program.

### Project description

The study, *Evaluation of the Effectiveness of an Online Program to Help Co-op Students Enhance their Employability Skills: A study of the University of Waterloo's Professional Development Program (WatPD)*, was conducted using end-of-course surveys, course data, pre- and post-tests, focus groups and exit interviews as well as employer evaluations of student performance. Students take one WatPD course in each work term until they have completed their requirements. The study assessed a number of areas including student reaction to the courses, learning impact and behaviour changes in the workplace.

### Findings

From among more than 24,000 end-of-course surveys submitted between 2010 and 2012, 61% of students rated courses as "very good" or "good," 27% rated courses as "satisfactory" and 12% rated courses as "poor" or "very poor." However, less than half of respondents said the courses maintained their interest and qualitative feedback found that some students didn't feel that they personally need employability skills improvement. The authors acknowledge that response rates were very low for the focus groups and exit interviews and thus may not be representative of the overall co-op student population.

The study indicated that students are learning content from the WatPD courses and that the knowledge they gain persists at graduation. Tests on course material showed that students were more familiar with the material after the course than before it started, with a 23% increase in scores in the post-test than in the pre-test. At the end of WatPD courses, the majority of students reported that their skills targeted by that course were improved, at least in part as a result of the course.

From an employer perspective, the study examined more than 96,000 employer work term evaluations and found that at every work term level, students enrolled in the WatPD program performed slightly better than their pre-WatPD peers.

## **Recommendations /Further research**

The authors say attention should be paid to increasing the percentage of students who react positively to the courses and that identifying best practices from courses with high ratings could improve the effectiveness of those courses that had lower ratings. A communications strategy that includes employer testimonials and information on employability skills could help address student perceptions that they do not need to improve these skills, say the authors.

Among other recommendations, the authors suggest following up with alumni to collect feedback on the impact of their WatPD courses once they have been working for some time, and continuing to build partnerships with employers and other work-integrated learning researchers to improve WatPD program evaluation methods.

The University of Waterloo is also a partner in a five-year HEQCO study on work-integrated learning. The final in the report series – based on a survey of college and university graduates 18 months after graduation – has been completed and is forthcoming.

*Authors of Evaluation of the Effectiveness of an Online Program to Help Co-op Students Enhance their Employability Skills: A study of the University of Waterloo's Professional Development Program (WatPD) are T. Judene Pretti, Tonya Noël and T. Gary Waller, University of Waterloo.*