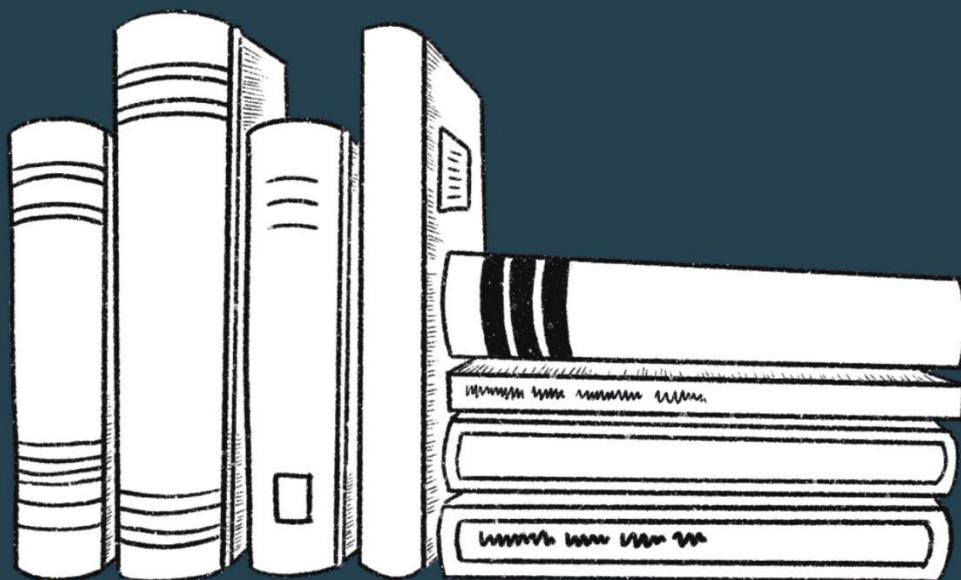


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Student Identity and Work-integrated Learning (WIL): Exploring Student Experiences of WIL by Demographic

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Introduction

The benefits of work-integrated learning (WIL) are well-documented: participating students gain practical work experience, develop self-efficacy, build job-readiness and develop in-demand skills that can improve their employment outcomes (McRae & Johnston, 2016; Choy, 2009; Ramji et al., 2021; Stirling et al., 2016). However, research shows that certain students, such as women, students with disabilities and LGBTQAI+ students, experience disparities in WIL outcomes, which include post-graduation employment rates and salaries (see: Itano-Boase et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2021; Bowen, 2020). Cukier et al. (2018) argue that as with other inequitable elements of the education system (e.g., credential tiers, fields of study, elite institutions and socioeconomic status), WIL can be another way students from underrepresented groups may be disadvantaged, further entrenching systemic inequities.

While Canadian literature on WIL focuses heavily on student perceptions, data about diversity and inclusion in WIL are scarce (Sattler & Peters, 2013; Peters et al., 2014; Cukier et al., 2018; Itano-Boase et al., 2021). Evaluations of WIL rarely include a diversity lens (Itano-Boase et al., 2021), and few studies focus on how different groups of students perceive their WIL experiences. A lack of data reflecting the personal lived experiences of underrepresented students makes it difficult to address equity gaps in WIL activities and outcomes.

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) recently published a report discussing the [benefits and challenges of remote-based WIL](#) (and will soon publish a report exploring student experiences of inclusivity). We based our work on data collected by our fall 2021 survey of WIL students, institutional administrators and employers. In this brief, we use this data set to examine student experiences and varying rates of satisfaction with WIL — across institutions, sectors and academic programs, and across delivery types (i.e., remote or in-person) — through the lens of identity, including gender, disability and immigration status. We demonstrate how demographic data enrich our understanding of effective, inclusive, high-quality WIL experiences¹ and reveal gaps and questions that require further exploration to ensure all students benefit from WIL.

Research Questions and Methodology

Our primary question is: How does student satisfaction with WIL experiences vary by background (demographic) characteristics?

In fall 2021, we distributed a survey² to 312 postsecondary students, asking questions about their experience and satisfaction during their WIL placements in the 2020-21 academic year. The survey asked questions related to institution, workplace and sector type and academic programs; on WIL characteristics (such as whether the placement was remote, hybrid or in-person); and on students' experiences of inclusion and accessibility. We gathered students' select demographic characteristics (such as gender, disability and immigrant status) and used STATA, Excel and NVivo to code qualitative responses. Statistical significance in our study refers to measured differences where $p \leq 0.05$.

¹ This brief provides additional context to address gaps in existing literature on the topic of inclusion in WIL, while acknowledging that we are unable to comment on all issues pertaining to diverse student experiences.

² The survey was developed by HEQCO and administered by Academica Group.

The descriptive findings we present are novel not only because they focus on satisfaction by demographic characteristics, but also because there is no province-wide administrative data collection in WIL. Our survey data allow us to form a picture of satisfaction by various student characteristics, but do not allow us to conduct intersectional or inferential analyses.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Our findings relate to overall student satisfaction, perceptions of the WIL application process and workplace experiences. We organize our findings according to the following student characteristics, which present the statistically significant disparities in satisfaction: gender, disability status and immigrant status.

Students Identifying as Women

Satisfaction with WIL did not vary across most demographic factors (disability, low-income, first-generation, immigrant and LGBTQAI+), but our data revealed a statistically significant difference in satisfaction by gender. Respondents who identified as men (86%) were statistically significantly more likely to say they were satisfied with their WIL experience compared to women (76%). There was little difference by gender between those who were very satisfied (35% for women versus 32% for men).

In our survey, women were more likely to be in unpaid WIL placements (47%) compared to men (28%). Women were more likely to say they felt uncomfortable at work (17% compared to 8% for men), that they had challenges with work culture (43% compared to 31% for men) and that they experienced barriers during their WIL (59% compared to 44% for men). Additionally, women experience harassment and inappropriate behaviour in WIL disproportionately: 20% of women in in-person WIL placements reported experiencing unwanted sexual behaviour during their placement compared to only 1% of men. This finding is not unique to our study; Moylan & Wood (2016) report that more than one-sixth of women in social work placements were subjected to offensive sexual stories, treated differently due to their gender or were stared at by their male colleagues.

Seventy percent of women in our survey cited mental health as a challenge at some point during their WIL compared to 52% of men. Understanding the reasons why women in WIL experience and report mental health challenges in greater numbers than men is beyond the scope of our data. However, research has explored the impact of work culture on women in male-dominated co-op placements; these women were more likely to show feelings of isolation and low self-efficacy, which affected overall attrition in engineering programs (Arthur & Guy, 2020). Other researchers have discussed the impact of misogynist culture in various work environments, particularly those in fields with significant gender differences, such as engineering (Cukier et al., 2018). This culture can range from a general atmosphere of 'male dominance' or incidences of sexual harassment to unavailability of washrooms for women in male-dominated workplaces (Cukier et al., 2018). These are factors that, to varying degrees, likely contribute to how many women experience WIL, but additional research is necessary to offer a more conclusive explanation.

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities were seven percentage points less likely to express satisfaction in WIL than students without disabilities (75% compared to 82%). Sixty-two percent of students with disabilities said they experienced challenges during their WIL compared to 52% of students who did not identify as having a disability. The application stage was particularly challenging for these students: 23% said they experienced barriers in the WIL application stage compared to 13% of students who did not identify as having a disability. Students with disabilities were also more likely to experience challenges during the interview stage (19% compared to 13%). In the WIL workplace, such students were more likely to say they felt ignored by others (27% compared to 17%) and that they experienced challenges with their mental health (73% compared to 61%).

The challenges experienced by students with disabilities in the education system and labour market have been documented by HEQCO and other researchers. During the application stage, individuals with disabilities may need to navigate complex dynamics (such as disclosure) and processes (e.g., registering at their institution's offices for students with disabilities, or getting medicalized diagnoses), which can affect clarity around available accommodations (Chatoor et al., 2021). Because of these barriers, some students consider not disclosing their disability (Von Schrader et al., 2013). For example, Pearson et al. (2003) found individuals who disclosed hearing disabilities and depression were less likely to receive calls for interviews than those who did not disclose a disability. Other researchers have demonstrated that some employers view candidates who disclose mental health disabilities as less suitable for positions than those who disclose a physical disability (Spirito Dalgin & Bellini, 2008; Pennington, 2010).

Students Who Are Immigrants

Immigrants expressed a similar level of satisfaction with their WIL experience compared to students who were born in Canada. However, they reported greater challenges at multiple points as they proceeded through different WIL experiences: the application stage (18% versus 13%), the interview stage (19% versus 12%) and the hiring stage (14% versus 9%). Immigrants were also 23% more likely to say they experienced barriers during the WIL placement itself (70% versus 47%).

Literature provides insight into immigrant experiences in the labour market that help explain why these challenges arise. Immigrants in Canada are more likely to face unemployment, experience precarious work and receive lower wages and lower wage premiums for education credentials than Canadian-born individuals (Anisef et al., 2010; Hira-Friesen, 2018). A recent study of Canadian immigrants found that most immigrants experienced difficulty specifically at the recruitment stage of the job process, with many citing barriers due to non-Western names and cultural stereotyping (Ertorer et al., 2020). An earlier study based on 13,000 resumes in Toronto, Ontario found that job seekers with Indian, Pakistani, Chinese and Greek names experienced more discrimination in the hiring process compared to those with English names (Oreopoulos, 2011). This phenomenon of bias is not unique to Ontario; a Swedish study by Åslund and Skans (2012) found that anonymizing resume applications led to an increased likelihood of hiring for women and individuals with non-Western names.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

High-quality WIL must be both accessible and inclusive, ensuring that all students can experience the associated development of skills and labour market benefits. WIL is intended to help students develop skills and connections that positively influence their career trajectory, but our findings reveal that some groups of students are not experiencing inclusive, high-quality WIL. This work helps identify where there may be differences in satisfaction based on EDID characteristics of students and moves beyond traditional measures of accessibility, such as graduation and labour market performance. The descriptive findings also demonstrate that collecting data on student experiences by demographic characteristics is both possible and necessary.

System-wide administrative data on WIL would allow policymakers and researchers to further investigate the differences we observed. Surveys and qualitative research are useful tools for identifying gaps at a high level and illuminating areas for further research, but in the absence of system-wide data we are unable to conduct analyses within smaller populations, such as individual First Nations groups within Indigenous groups, specific identities within the LGBTQAI+ community or disaggregating data for racialized students. We recommend large-scale, system-wide data collection to enable future WIL research to explore student identity groups and their intersections with more confidence and clarity than descriptive methods alone. With data to support inferential analyses, for example, researchers can explore how different factors interact with each other in complex systems.

We also recommend some lines of inquiry for future research. First, what factors drive differentiated experiences, and why do these differences exist? How do experiences of WIL differ by disability type, for example? Secondly, how can institutions and employers support students from all backgrounds? Our findings show that the application process is problematic for some students; how can it be improved? What policies, programs and actions could be implemented to create more supportive and inclusive environments for women, as well as for individuals with disabilities? A focused study, with a large and robust sample, would allow researchers to examine these questions in a reliable and data-driven way and allow for a more complex and nuanced understanding of student WIL experiences.

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