

## **Yours to Discover, Learn and Earn: Ontario International Student Experiences in Postsecondary Work and Study**

### **Project Team: The DAIS and Medow Consulting**

Work-integrated learning (WIL), which includes internships, co-ops and placements, supports students' transitions from postsecondary education to the job market by providing them opportunities to gain practical experience, develop transferable skills and build their professional networks. For international students, Canadian work experience through WIL not only helps them develop valuable career-building skills but supports their financial needs during their studies and strengthens their eligibility for permanent residency. Understanding international students' experiences with WIL and the barriers they face is essential for policymakers and postsecondary institutions to promote access and student success.

### **Research Questions and Methodology**

This study aimed to identify the challenges and barriers international students face in accessing WIL opportunities in Ontario, and the importance of WIL to their academic growth and career development. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are international students' in-study work and WIL experiences in Ontario?
2. What actionable insights about international students' in-study work and WIL experiences in Ontario could help inform institutions and policies in postsecondary and adjacent domains (e.g. workforce development, immigration)?

Researchers conducted five semi-structured interviews and virtual focus groups with 47 international students attending Ontario universities and publicly assisted colleges in fall 2024, with each session involving between six and fifteen participants.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

The international students and graduates interviewed consistently emphasized that WIL strengthened their professional networks and benefited their future career paths. They also highlighted that WIL provides exposure to Canadian workplaces, allowing students to build connections and understand organizational cultures and dynamics. WIL experiences provided insight into what their ideal workplace might look like, which helped guide their job searches and ease transitions into the labour market. Students also reported gaining industry-relevant skills and experience, and an opportunity to apply their academic knowledge and skills in the real world.

The international students who participated in the study also described facing systematic barriers that limited their access to WIL opportunities. Students reported that it was difficult to find on-campus positions due to competition and unclear hiring processes. They also felt that, in some cases, employers preferred to hire domestic students who were viewed as more likely to remain with their organization long term. Further, interviewees shared that their legal status had excluded them from certain job opportunities, and recent federal policy changes reducing their permitted working hours further complicated their ability to secure paid employment. Some participants, as an alternative, took on unpaid work or volunteered to gain experience.

Participants also described financial pressures that stemmed from increasing tuition and a lack of financial safety nets. They mentioned facing barriers to access tuition support, scholarships or aids, as those are mostly restricted to domestic students. Interviewees expressed the need for more support and guidance, including clarification about WIL eligibility and application processes, as some had to secure their placements independently without proper advice.

Recommended next steps that emerged from the study included:

- standardizing and increasing transparency for WIL processes across institutions;
- improving international student access to WIL programs supported by the federal government;
- reducing work permit requirements for international students participating in WIL;
- aligning work–study opportunities with labour market needs; and
- ensuring targeted support is available to international students to help them secure placements.