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**Key things to  
know about WIL  
in rural, remote and  
Northern areas**



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RRN COVID RECOVERY

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# Introduction

At BHER, we believe that WIL is an important part of COVID recovery. To support inclusive and responsive WIL opportunities in rural, remote and Northern (RRN) communities, we convened focus groups and conducted interviews to hear directly from those who live, learn, and work in RRN areas.

Through that process, we curated a short series of videos available on our [WIL Hub](#) to highlight the first-hand perspectives of individuals from these communities that have knowledge or experience with WIL. Our aim is to let them speak for themselves, and to help communicate the value of WIL as rural and Northern businesses move forward. Meant to be a companion piece to the videos, this document offers an overview of key insights into the challenges and opportunities for training and learning in rural, remote and Northern communities.

## **WIL IN RURAL, REMOTE AND NORTHERN COMMUNITIES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

Rural communities across the provinces and territories are home to roughly one in five Canadians<sup>1</sup> and contribute 30% of Canada's GDP.<sup>2</sup> They are also home to approximately half of the 1.7 million First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people in Canada,<sup>3</sup> who are increasingly well-educated,<sup>4</sup> represent fast-growing populations,<sup>5</sup> and are vital stakeholders in any conversation about the future of work in rural, remote or Northern areas.

Although circumstances vary considerably, when it comes to WIL, RRN communities possess many unique strengths. They are often close-knit, which can simplify the process of bringing community members together on shared priorities, including efforts to develop new skills training programs or initiatives. Plus, the appeal of rural lifestyles and proximity to nature can help attract students to WIL opportunities in smaller communities, providing employers with access to talent, and potentially contributing to population growth.

Along with many strengths, RRN communities face some unique challenges that can impact their ability to access or deliver quality WIL opportunities. For example, long distances between RRN communities and post-secondary institutions are barriers to in-person learning, but insufficient access to the Internet limits the ability of many learners to access online learning and training options. The shift towards remote work and online learning because of COVID-19 has only heightened the need for reliable high-speed Internet in RRN communities.

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities face barriers that often go beyond those faced by non-Indigenous populations, including socio-economic barriers and outright discrimination. For example, to access training and employment opportunities when local opportunities aren't available, learners may be required to leave their home communities (including family and elder supports) for places where language and cultural barriers make it difficult to succeed.



For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in RRN areas, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges while presenting new ones. Public health restrictions that limit individual mobility have impacted the ability of businesses to attract new workers, while the economic impact of the pandemic has forced many businesses to scale back spending on employee training activities, including WIL.<sup>6</sup> Many other businesses were forced to lay-off employees. Research suggests the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected labour market conditions in Indigenous communities, and that employment levels in RRN communities have been slower to recover than elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

As businesses and economies in RRN areas begin to recover, they will need workers to help them grow. WIL is one way that employers can access new talent and ideas. Drawing on what we heard from people we spoke with, the section below offers some Key Things to Know for employers in smaller communities who are interested in establishing new WIL programs.

## **1. Key Thing to Know: Relationships are Critical in Small Communities**

For businesses looking to create WIL programs that include people and partners in RRN communities, trust is essential. The best way to build partnerships and develop trust is to show genuine interest in the community or communities your WIL program will impact. When establishing a new program, project or initiative in an RRN area, it's important to connect with community stakeholders, including municipal leaders and chambers of commerce, tribal councils, elders and other community leaders to learn more about the area and explain what you seek to accomplish.

Relationship-building can be a time consuming process. Where it involves non-Indigenous organizations seeking to work with Indigenous communities, the process may take months or even years. Employers should think carefully about how their program will benefit the community they seek to partner with, and consider what a relationship built on reciprocity might look like.

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Academic partners at post-secondary institutions may also have connections and relationships that can be helpful in the development of new WIL programs. Reaching out to regional post-secondary institutions (through co-op offices, community engagement offices, or directly to instructors with relevant interests) can help employers navigate the process of creating WIL opportunities and may be a way to connect with others.

When possible, in-person meetings are best, but for reasons of COVID safety, as well as the sheer distances between many RRN communities, in-person meetings aren't always possible. A phone-call or video-chat can help initiate a relationship. Opportunities to connect might include meeting with stakeholders to tell them about a potential WIL program and include them in the program's development and design.

Once a WIL program is established, consider hosting a "town hall" meeting where community stakeholders have the opportunity to see a WIL training program in action.

**To build authentic relationships in communities, employers should:**

- Approach a variety of leaders within the community, looking for opportunities to work together and support one another. Be direct about what your partnership is and who it's intended for.
- Be patient - relationships built on trust and reciprocity take time.
- Look for connections and support through post-secondary institutions.

To learn more, see our video, "[The Importance of Relationships for Northern WIL Programs](#)".





## 2. Key Thing to Know: Youth in RRN Areas Want Meaningful Experiences

As RRN communities look to move forward from the impacts of COVID, youth are eager to make a difference. Youth in rural areas report closer ties to their communities compared with youth in urban ones,<sup>8</sup> and look for opportunities to have a meaningful impact in their communities.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that WIL experiences that engage youth in ways that benefit their communities can improve the ability of employers to recruit and retain young people.

Of course, “meaningful” WIL experiences go beyond rote tasks with minimal responsibility or oversight. Part of the process of establishing relationships with partners in an RRN community means learning about the challenges they face, and thinking strategically about how a WIL program could help. In some cases, simply providing opportunities for youth to gain paid experience will be recognized as a meaningful contribution.

While the bulk of a learner’s time might be spent training at a job site, there may be opportunities to connect them with community leaders, or involve them in a community activity that they and the WIL host have agreed is important. Doing so will help motivate the learner, while strengthening the relationship between the WIL host and the community.

Part of the process of creating meaningful WIL also includes asking the learner what they want to get from the experience. Doing so will help the WIL host understand the learner’s expectations and goals. Should the learner have ideas on how their WIL experience can respond to community needs, they can work with the host to co-develop a meaningful experience.

### **To create meaningful WIL, employers can do the following:**

- Increase opportunities for RRN learners by hiring directly from their communities.
- Look for opportunities to work with other community stakeholders to create engaging learning experiences with greater impact.
- Meet early on with WIL participants to better understand their objectives and think creatively about how the WIL experience can respond to their interests and priorities.

For more about what constitutes a quality WIL experience, have a look at the [Create Quality WIL](#) page of our WIL Hub, and see our video, “[Engaging Youth in the Design of WIL Programs](#)”.

### 3. Key Thing to Know: It's Important to Consider Participant Realities

In addition to looking for ways to create meaningful experiences, it's important to meet with the learner early on to discuss their goals and expectations for the WIL experience. Doing so can also help the host understand the learner's concerns, or areas where they lack confidence and want to improve.

We heard from multiple individuals that it's important to "meet youth where they're at" and create WIL opportunities that are responsive to the needs and priorities of the individual learner. This means recognizing that individuals have different strengths and weaknesses, and structuring WIL experiences accordingly. As Nisga'a Youth Engagement Coordinator Leslie Robinson put it, "You can't have a check-box for everything on applications."

In other words, one-size-fits-all approaches to WIL in RRN areas are less effective than those that recognize the strengths, limitations, and interests of the learner, and adjust accordingly. WIL providers who recognize this will find participants who are motivated and more likely to stay beyond the WIL placement.

In RRN contexts, knowledge of the cultures and lived experiences of WIL participants can give employers the information they need to provide engaging and inclusive WIL experiences. Non-Indigenous employers looking to partner with Indigenous communities through WIL, for example, may need to learn about Indigenous ways of learning and knowing, and consider how a program should be adjusted to reflect the learning styles of First Nations, Inuit, or Métis WIL participants.

Engaging with learners early on can help employers develop cultural awareness, understand individual needs, avoid misunderstandings, and proactively identify solutions to barriers, technological or otherwise.

For example, access to childcare often presents a challenge for RRN residents to the extent that parents can be forced to choose between childcare and employment, impeding their ability to participate in



full-time working or training opportunities.<sup>10</sup> Due to COVID, parents may have to miss work in the event that their child becomes ill or their school is temporarily closed.

Seasonal activities like hunting and fishing can also put learners in a difficult position of choosing between their responsibilities to a WIL host, or participating in activities that are important to their culture and community.

Providing opportunities for the learner to discuss their needs and potential challenges can help employers understand the barriers learners may face in completing their WIL experience, and adapt the WIL experience accordingly.

Regular check-ins throughout placement-based WIL experiences can also help employers identify challenges that the learner may be encountering, and provide opportunities for the learner to draw on their lived experience, share their perspective and influence decisions. And finally, conducting an “exit interview” can help the WIL host refine and improve the experience for future participants.

These aren’t just best practices for WIL in RRN areas—they’re important for any quality WIL experience. In RRN areas, however, there are challenges and complexities that go beyond standard approaches to WIL, and therefore underscore the importance of considering participant realities and working with them to ensure successful, engaging WIL experiences.

**To learn from your learners and create engaging, inclusive WIL experiences, employers can:**

- “Meet learners where they’re at” by providing flexible and responsive WIL experiences. Set goals with the WIL participant, and discuss potential challenges they may face.
- Understand the context of the community, and develop cultural awareness.
- Have regular check-ins to get feedback, build trust, and involve the learner in decision-making and planning processes.
- Use assessments and exit interviews to continually revise and improve your approach.

To learn more about engaging your learners in the workplace, see our Guide on [Performance Assessment Strategies in WIL](#), and [BHER’s guide to equity, diversity, and inclusion \(EDI\) in WIL](#). You might also be interested in our video, [“Meeting Youth Where They’re At”](#).

#### 4. Key Thing to Know: Mentorship in RRN Areas is Impactful and Unique

Mentorship is critical to providing high quality WIL experiences, regardless of where the WIL opportunity takes place. In RRN areas, however, mentorship often goes beyond the basics of checking in with participants over a coffee, giving advice, and monitoring their progress. It often requires flexibility and problem-solving skills to overcome logistical challenges, like connectivity issues (where the WIL experience involves remote-work, or public health circumstances prompt stay-at-home orders). Similarly, weather-related issues can also make in-person WIL, or long-distances to job sites (where public transportation options are limited or non-existent), difficult or dangerous. We heard, for example, from Rex Holwell, Regional Operations Lead with SmartICE in Nain, Nunatsiavut, that in addition to supervision, training and support, mentorship in his community sometimes involves driving employees to and from their worksite.

Wherever possible, WIL programs or training initiatives should try to match learners with supervisors or mentors who share a culture or have similar backgrounds. Mentorship means different things to different communities, and western-culture and social norms may not be inclusive of Indigenous ways of learning and knowing. Matching learners and mentors who share cultures or backgrounds will not only help build trust and contribute to inclusive learning environments, but can also help learners visualize potential career paths for themselves. As Shawna Dicker of SmartICE told us, "There's a sense of pride when Inuit learn from and teach one another, and to share that within their communities. There's this sense that, 'that could be me in the future.'"

Where WIL participants come from communities beyond the location of the WIL experience, mentorship can also be about making people feel more welcome. Some may face linguistic or cultural barriers that can make it difficult to integrate, leading to feelings of isolation. Those who didn't grow up in RRN areas may feel anxious about the prospect of moving to a smaller community with fewer resources and amenities than they're accustomed to.

Mentors who understand this can help ensure that WIL participants have opportunities to engage in community activities, connect with the resources that are available, and share their experiences and concerns. A good mentor can help WIL participants succeed in their role and adjust to life in the local community if it is new to them. Good mentorship may also increase the likelihood that the WIL participant will continue on in a more permanent capacity.

**To support an RRN mentorship, employers can do the following:**

- Think about how to account for logistical challenges, such as long distances, public health circumstances (i.e. stay-at-home orders), asynchronous work shifts, technical challenges, or even inclement weather. Have a plan, wherever possible, and share it with the WIL learner.
- Identify mentors who have strong community connections and are willing to go “above and beyond” in making WIL participants feel welcome.
- Wherever possible, pair WIL participants with supervisors who share a culture or language. If this isn’t possible, ensure that supervisors have high levels of cultural competency.

For some general guidelines on effective mentorship, see our [Guide to Mentorship](#) and our video, “[Promoting equity, diversity & inclusion through WIL in rural, remote and Northern communities](#)”.



## 5. Key Thing to Know: WIL Can Help Businesses Give Back

Community engagement is critical for RRN areas, especially when it provides opportunities for young people to gain new skills and workplace experience. We heard from employers and WIL practitioners in RRN areas that businesses who participate in community events and respond to community needs are better positioned to provide meaningful WIL experiences, and attract and retain potential talent.

As RRN communities move forward from the disruptions caused by COVID, in-person events like festivals and pow-wows provide opportunities for businesses to demonstrate community engagement and build relationships with community stakeholders.

When non-Indigenous businesses or individuals seek to grow new businesses or develop WIL programs involving Indigenous communities, they must work with local Indigenous partners to identify ways that their activities can meaningfully give back to the community. This is both a best practice and a recommendation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It's all the more important considering that Indigenous communities were among the hardest hit by the pandemic,<sup>11</sup> and employment levels have been slower to recover compared to the population at large.<sup>12</sup>

In our conversations with Amber Fletcher, Director of Community Engagement and Research Centre, University of Regina, she stressed the need to develop partnerships based on respect and reciprocity: "Something that I would emphasize is the importance of trust building and the importance of ensuring a community-first or community-benefit approach, which is really embedded with the values of reciprocity." This means working with partners to co-develop WIL experiences and identify ways that a program can provide equal value to everyone.



In tightly-knit RRN communities, employers contribute not only to economic well-being, but also to the culture and social fabric of the communities in which they operate. As economies seek to bounce back from the impacts of COVID-19, the imperative to give back only strengthens.

**To foster the community's stake in your partnership, employers can:**

- Prioritize and recruit WIL participants from the local community.
- Work with community partners to identify ways that your business, organization or program can give back, and consider ways that a WIL placement can support community priorities.
- Where a non-Indigenous led WIL program involves Indigenous communities, work with the communities to develop relationships built on reciprocity, get input on the program, and identify how the WIL activities can provide value to all parties involved. Remember that this can take time.

To learn more, see our videos on "[WIL and Community Engagement](#)" and "[Partnering with Indigenous Communities, and Place-Based Education](#)" on BHER's WIL resource hub.

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# Conclusion

This document summarizes a few key themes that are important to consider for WIL in RRN areas, as identified by people with experience as students, supervisors, or WIL practitioners. The themes are meant to be broadly applicable and not overly prescriptive. WIL activities should be reflective of the fact that each community has different needs and circumstances.

It must be stressed that the term “RRN areas” does not describe a single category of community, but rather a complex, diverse range of communities across vast regions and distinct cultures. For our purposes, we use “RRN” as a catch-all not to suggest communities share the same characteristics or sets of challenges, but rather to recognize that WIL outside of urban, southern, and more populated areas is unique, and often calls for unique considerations.

For further information, consult the Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER)'s WIL Hub at [bher.ca/wil-hub](https://bher.ca/wil-hub).

# Methodology

The key themes summarized in this document were primarily informed by semi-structured interviews conducted in two phases in Spring 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021-22, with 14 individuals who have experience participating in or delivering WIL in RRN areas. These interviews were conducted as part of an effort to create digital (video) resources to help inform WIL and COVID recovery in RRN communities. The videos are featured on BHER's WIL Resource Hub.

Additionally, the document was informed by the perspectives of college and university students from RRN communities who participated in thirteen focus-groups in July, September, October, and November 2021. Based on data students provided at registration, 18.48% identified themselves as living in a Northern area, 22.83% in a Rural area, and 10.87% in a Remote area.

Alongside the interviews, focus groups, and consultations, we conducted a literature review looking at peer reviewed articles and sector resources related to WIL in rural, remote, and Northern areas (respectively).

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