**BUSINESS
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ROUNDTABLE

EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION IN WORK - INTEGRATED LEARNING

Student Stories, Employer Priorities:
Key Findings

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ROUNDTABLE

In this series we spoke to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) leaders and students from equity-deserving communities about barriers and needs for more equitable WIL opportunities and inclusive COVID recovery.

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OVERVIEW

COVID-19 dramatically altered the nature of work, including Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). And it continues to have disproportionate impacts on students and recent graduates from equity-deserving communities, especially as they transition from school to work.[1] But the pandemic also triggered momentum for change, like the willingness of post-secondaries and employers to adopt innovative models of WIL, and underscored the value of a more inclusive WIL ecosystem for employers in need of talent.[2]

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1. Barata, Cukier, and Parkin, "Young Adults Have Been Hit Hard by the Pandemic. The Recovery Must Not Leave Them Behind"; Block, "Racialized and Indigenous Workers Are Bearing the Brunt of Pandemic Job Loss"; Block, Galabuzi, and Tranjan, "Canada's Colour Coded Income Inequality"; Fairlie, Couch, and Xu, "The Impacts of COVID-19 on Minority Unemployment: First Evidence from April 2020 CPS Microdata"; Gatto et al., "Students with Disabilities: Relationship between Participation Rates and Perceptions of Work-Integrated Learning by Disability Type"; Wall, "Gendered Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Proportion of Youth Neither in Employment nor Education at the Start of the School Year"

2. Kay, Ferns, Russell, and Smith, "The Emerging Future: Innovative Models of Work-Integrated Learning."

NOW IS THE TIME TO BUILD ON THIS MOMENTUM.

WIL is one way to help close employment gaps that equity-deserving communities face and to build back equitably. WIL creates talent pathways for students through work-related experiences that bridge them into careers. It also helps employers create the environments and opportunities to recruit and retain the talent they need to recover and grow.[3]

But we need to improve WIL access and representation for equity-deserving communities. We also need to figure out the best ways to address systemic barriers in the WIL ecosystem and provide quality, inclusive experiences and equitable outcomes for all students.

PART OF THE SOLUTION COMES FROM LISTENING TO STUDENTS THEMSELVES – THEIR VOICES, THEIR STORIES.

We did just that. And we built this resource to reflect and amplify the student voices that are often unheard in the WIL ecosystem.

We spoke with close to 100 equity-deserving students and recent graduates from colleges, universities, and polytechnics across Canada about their experiences accessing and completing WIL experiences. We discussed the full WIL lifecycle - from awareness of WILs, to access, recruitment, and onboarding, to what it's like to complete a WIL - and asked them what can be done to improve experiences.

We also spoke with non-profit leaders whose organizations support equity-deserving students and youth with educational and employment achievement or help employers build EDI strategies in their workplaces. We discussed the challenges and opportunities for improving pathways into careers and EDI in the workplace. These practitioners operate in

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3. https://bher.ca/wil-hub/explore-wil/employer-wil-benefits-a-glance; https://www.bher.ca/benefits-wil

the space between communities, post-secondaries, and employers - their expertise and experiences dovetail with the stories shared by students.

Together these consultations paint a picture of lived experiences and expert perspectives that call out complex, systemic challenges in WIL but also underscore priorities for employers, post-secondaries, and practitioners to build a more equitable, inclusive post-COVID WIL ecosystem.

WHAT DID WE HEAR?

Many of the challenges students face are about coming up against a system that wasn't built for them.[4]

- **Awareness gaps:** Many students are unaware of the opportunities out there or the value they can have for their careers. For students in programs without mandatory WILs, there are often misperceptions about what WIL is all about. For example, many students haven't been exposed to alternative WILs, like interdisciplinary industry projects, and believe that co-ops or other structured work placements are the only types of WILs out there and so don't know what to look for.

- **Engagement & recruitment barriers:** For students that are aware of opportunities, they don't always feel like they 'connect' to them or can 'see themselves' in WILs. Many students have experienced discrimination across school and work environments. This can lead to a lack of confidence in skills and abilities, and a lack of motivation to seek out optional WIL opportunities or barriers connecting to quality placements for those with mandatory WILs (i.e., WIL opportunities that are required for a degree, diploma, or professional qualification).

- **Responsibilities & lived realities:** Many students without mandatory WIL placements are unable to fit WILs into their lives. Socio-economic barriers tend to prevent low income students or students with caretaker or other

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4. Cukier, Campbell, and McNamara, "Ensuring Equitable Access to Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario"

financial responsibilities from taking advantage of WILs, especially if they are unpaid, require full time hours, or are inflexible about scheduling alongside other paid work.

- **Systemic barriers:** Larger challenges of belonging and inclusion persist on campuses and in workplaces, including racism, discrimination, biased treatment, a lack of representation in supervisors and mentors, and a lack of wraparound or culturally appropriate supports that acknowledge the lived realities of many equity-deserving communities.

COVID EXACERBATED SYSTEMIC BARRIERS .

The shift to remote work cut the number of WILs and hindered access to remaining WILs.[5] Program completion for mandatory WILs was also affected. Students often felt they were left to 'figure things out on their own' - an isolating experience that compounds the impact of these challenges on finances, mental health, and performance at school and work.

- **Responsibilities & lived realities:** Disruptions to childcare, wrap-around services like mental health and accessibility services made participating in WILs during the pandemic even more difficult. Students from equity-deserving communities have also been at higher risk of housing and financial insecurity, discrimination and racism, and exposure to violence. These lived realities tend to take a front seat over finding and completing WILs.

- **The digital divide:** Challenges of unreliable or a lack of internet and digital tools/infrastructure, especially for students in rural, remote, and Northern communities and low-income students, became increasingly apparent in the shift to remote work. This prevented many students from participating in virtual WILs, and a lack of understanding from supervisors about what it's like to face this divide (e.g. highly unstable internet causing students to miss

5. Government of Canada, "Work-Integrated Learning in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic"; Wall, "COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts on the Work Placements of Post Secondary Students."

meetings) led to unreasonable expectations and misperceptions about professionalism and performance.

- **Social capital:** First-generation and international students tend to lack the 'social capital' or informal prerequisites, like knowing the right people or the best ways to get your foot in the door, that inevitably help with WIL access. And, COVID often canceled or impacted the quality of the types of recruitment events and initiatives that help students build that capital.

- **Universal Accessibility:** For many students with disabilities, remote work made WILs more physically and financially accessible. But these experiences are not uniform - for some, remote work meant a loss of necessary support services (like access to campus centers that provide and advocate for accessibility accommodations) or technology and infrastructure needed to effectively work remotely.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The disruptions brought on by COVID - and the exposure of so many existing equity challenges - have also made way for new opportunities to meaningfully address these very challenges.

Our consultations also focused on success stories - positive experiences with remote work, post-secondary supports, and WIL supervisors and mentors - and we learned more about some of what students expressed they need from employers, post-secondaries, and WIL practitioners to better embed equity, diversity, and inclusion into WIL.

- **Inclusive engagement:** Intentional, targeted, and community-centric awareness raising, marketing, and WIL 'matchmaking' strategies are needed across campus communication channels. Genuine relationship building by WIL practitioners and employers with student and community groups is a one key way to make inroads and bring students in.

- **De-biased recruitment & onboarding:** Continued efforts from WIL employers to address biases and barriers that might exist in traditional recruitment practices like interviews and resume screening are needed. As is a willingness to engage in more inclusive onboarding strategies that meet students where they are.

- **Virtual & hybrid work:** The rise of remote-work addressed many barriers students faced before the pandemic, from commuting and temporary housing costs to more accessible workplace options. The students we spoke with advocated to keep these options in place, where it makes sense. But, WIL supervisors need to do so proactively - to consider needs that vary by individuals, and to monitor for unintended consequences of hybrid work on equity and inclusion.[6] For example, through strategies that ensure WIL students who work primarily remotely don't miss out on informal mentorship or development opportunities.

- **Evolving approaches to WIL:** Innovative WIL models, like micro-placements and industry projects, have design features that show potential for engaging equity-deserving students. greater program flexibility and co-design with students, Though these aren't "silver bullet" solutions for access, innovative WIL models are better positioned to take lived realities into account at the design stage and then offer more flexible avenues for participation. Innovative WIL models can also help bridge students without prior experience or connection to the workforce to a place where they feel better prepared to participate in a traditional placement (e.g., internship).

- **Whole of WIL EDI mindset:** Equity, diversity, and inclusion needs to be an integral part of how WILs are

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6. De Smet and Mihir, "Reimagining the Post Pandemic Workforce"; Samuel and Robertson, "Don't Let Hybrid Work Set Back Your DEI Efforts."

designed and delivered. In part this involves integrated, continuous supports and wraparound services from campus through to placements and back again, program co-design with students and fair, competitive compensation, wherever possible. This also involves inclusive, representative student mentorship and WIL supervisors that lead with empathy, understanding, and proactive responses to the lived realities and needs of students. This is when meaningful talent development and retention can happen.

CONNECTIVITY & COLLABORATION WILL BE CENTRAL FOR MAKING THESE PRIORITIES A REALITY.

Progress can't happen without post-secondary programs, WIL practitioners, and employers working together to center equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout the WIL lifecycle. Doing so will help employers, especially small and medium-sized organizations, who are building their capacity in WIL and EDI, find the people they're looking for while helping post-secondaries grow the number of quality, accessible placements available for equity-deserving communities. And at BHER, we are focused on continuing to build the EDI-centered tools, resources, and initiatives that will help get them there.

An integrated, whole of WIL approach that reflects the needs of equity-deserving communities will bring us all through COVID recovery.

METHODOLOGY

The resource series *Student Stories, Employer Priorities* is based on key informant interviews with equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) leaders completed during Spring 2021 and roundtable consultations with students and recent graduates completed during Summer and Fall 2021.

These consultations build on employer and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) stakeholder consultations conducted by BHER over 2020 and were designed to help close knowledge gaps and understand priorities for:

- How to move forward on student-centric solutions to underrepresentation and inequities in WIL; and

- How to build inclusive, quality WIL experiences that support the needs of equity-deserving student communities in the context of remote/hybrid work and ongoing COVID-19 recovery.

To be inclusive and impactful, efforts to address representation, equity, and belonging in WIL must reflect and amplify the voices of students— those with direct lived experience.

We therefore focused on:

- The lived experiences and perspectives of post-secondary students and recent graduates from equity-deserving communities; and

- Key informant interviews with subject-matter experts and leaders of national and regional non-profit organizations who service equity-deserving communities, including students and youth, and/ or support employers in addressing organizational EDI needs.

We have anonymized quotes from participants and edited them for clarity.

These resources do not purport to reflect the experiences and insights of all students from equity-deserving communities and all EDI subject-matter experts. Rather, they serve as a snapshot of a representative subgroup of students and EDI leaders across the country. While lived experiences are in many ways unique to individuals, communities, and other factors like geography and socio-economic status, the learnings shared in these resources reflect shared and common experiences across communities, unless otherwise noted.

This resource series is designed for BHER's WIL Resource Hub, and is a companion to our employer guide for **EDI in WIL**. The development of these resources was made possible through BHER's Covid Recovery funding from Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada.

STUDENT ROUNDTABLES

We conducted a series of 20 virtual roundtables with nearly 100 college, polytechnic, and university students and recent graduates from equity-deserving communities across all regions of Canada (though participants from Northern Canada were from the provincial north only), including members of our Student Advisory Board. We invited all students/recent graduates that either completed a WIL, attempted to secure/complete a WIL, or served in a student leadership role since the start of the COVID pandemic to participate.
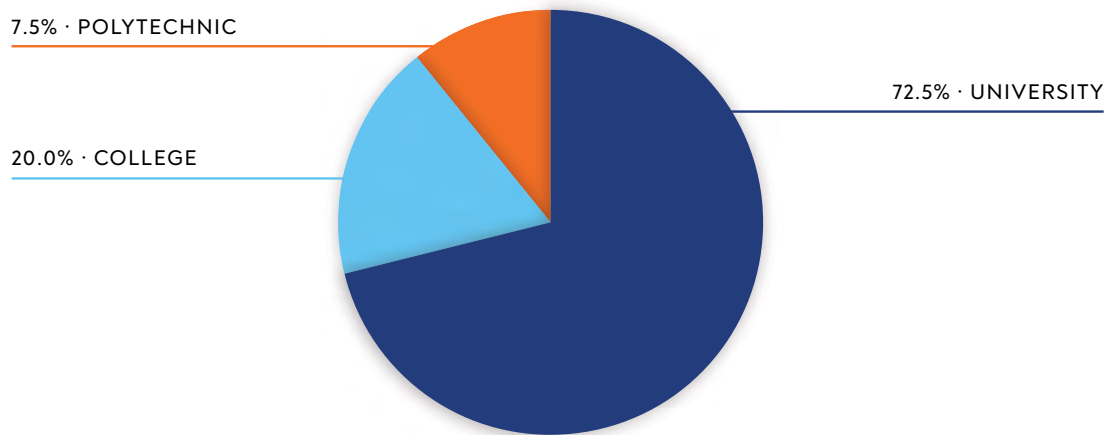
We focused on:

- Barriers faced in accessing and completing WILs during COVID

- Needs, opportunities, and success stories for improving accessibility, equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging in WIL, with emphasis on COVID recovery.

To evoke more unique insights and experiences associated with the different phases of the WIL lifecycle and in turn, specific, actionable priorities, we used an experiential lens wherein we focused on barriers, needs, and opportunities separately by phase: Access & Awareness; Recruitment & Onboarding; and Completing a WIL.
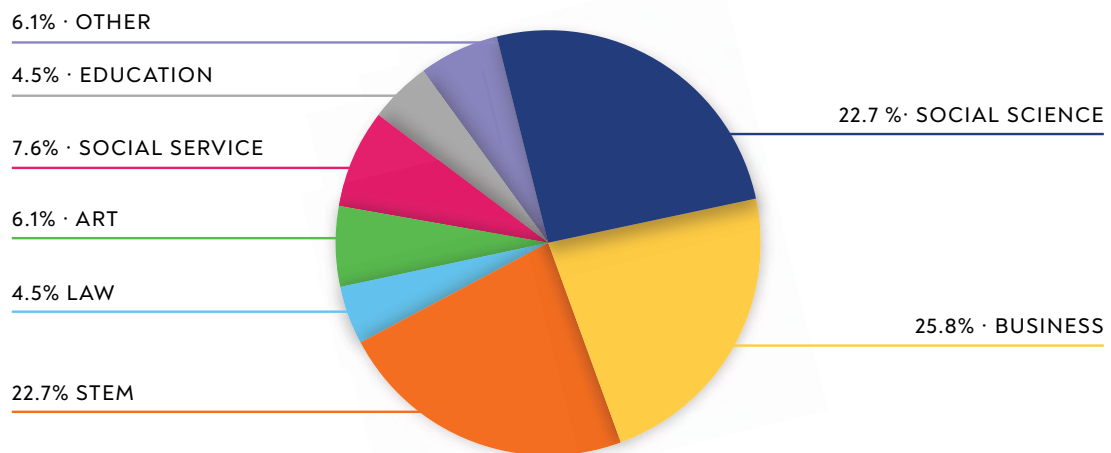
We also approached the consultations through a strengths-based lens wherein we emphasized the value of student voices and experiences, and focused on positive aspects of WIL experiences, not only barriers or negative experiences. We used empathic facilitation practices to create a respectful, open, and inclusive virtual environment given the sensitive subject-matter and potentially triggering nature of recounting marginalizing experiences.
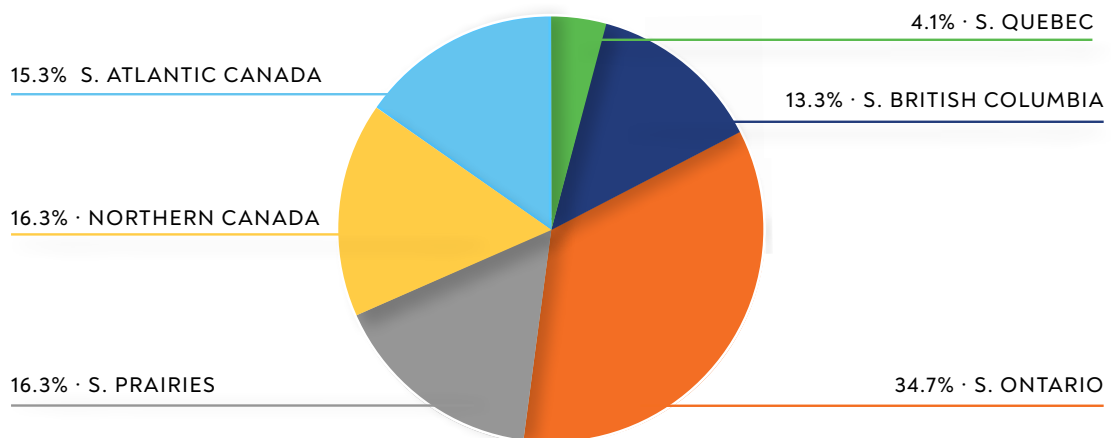
Demographic information on who we spoke to:

INSTITUTION TYPE

7.5% · POLYTECHNIC

20.0% · COLLEGE

72.5% · UNIVERSITY

FIELD OF STUDY

6.1% · OTHER

4.5% · EDUCATION

7.6% · SOCIAL SERVICE

6.1% · ART

4.5% LAW

22.7% STEM

22.7 %· SOCIAL SCIENCE

25.8% · BUSINESS

REGION

4.1% · S. QUEBEC

15.3% S. ATLANTIC CANADA

13.3% · S. BRITISH COLUMBIA

16.3% · NORTHERN CANADA

16.3% · S. PRAIRIES

34.7% · S. ONTARIO

25% of participants self-identified as living in a rural or remote community.
32% of these being also from Northern communities.

All demographic data beyond school, program and region was captured through an anonymous, voluntary survey and reflect a subset of roundtable participants (n = 80) that completed the survey. These are summarized in figures below.

Racial and/or Ethnic Identity
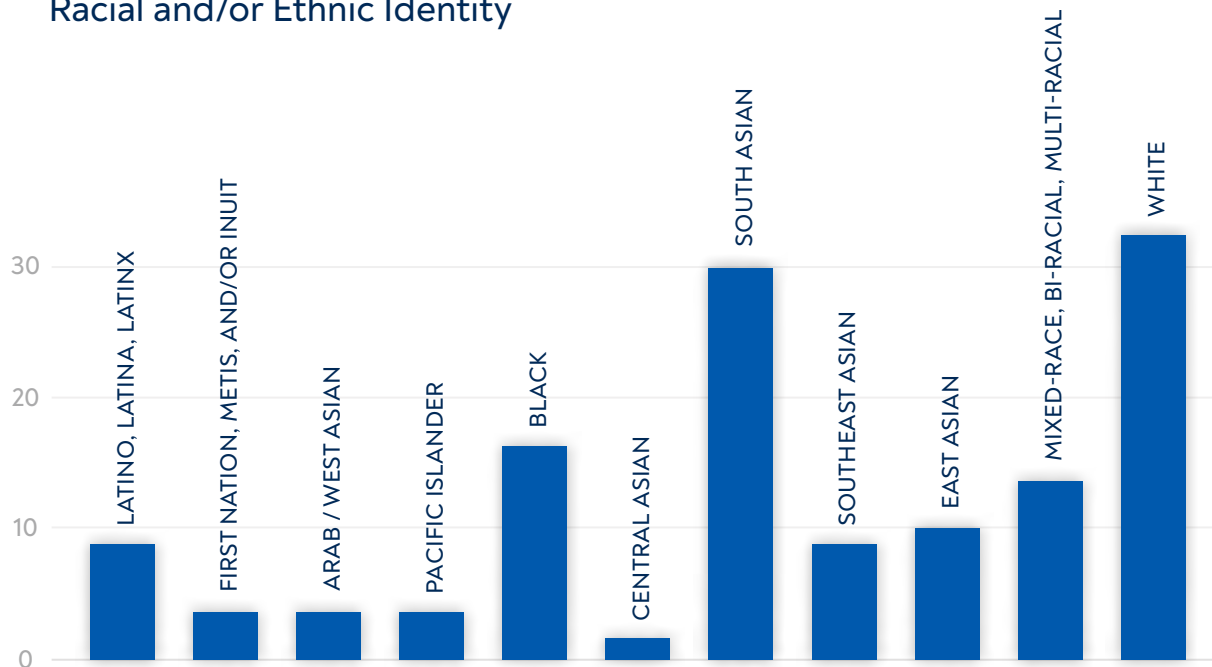
Note: Percentages do not add to 100 as participants were able to choose multiple options (e.g. 27% of participants who identify as white also identify as Mixed-Race, Bi-Racial, or Multi-Racial).

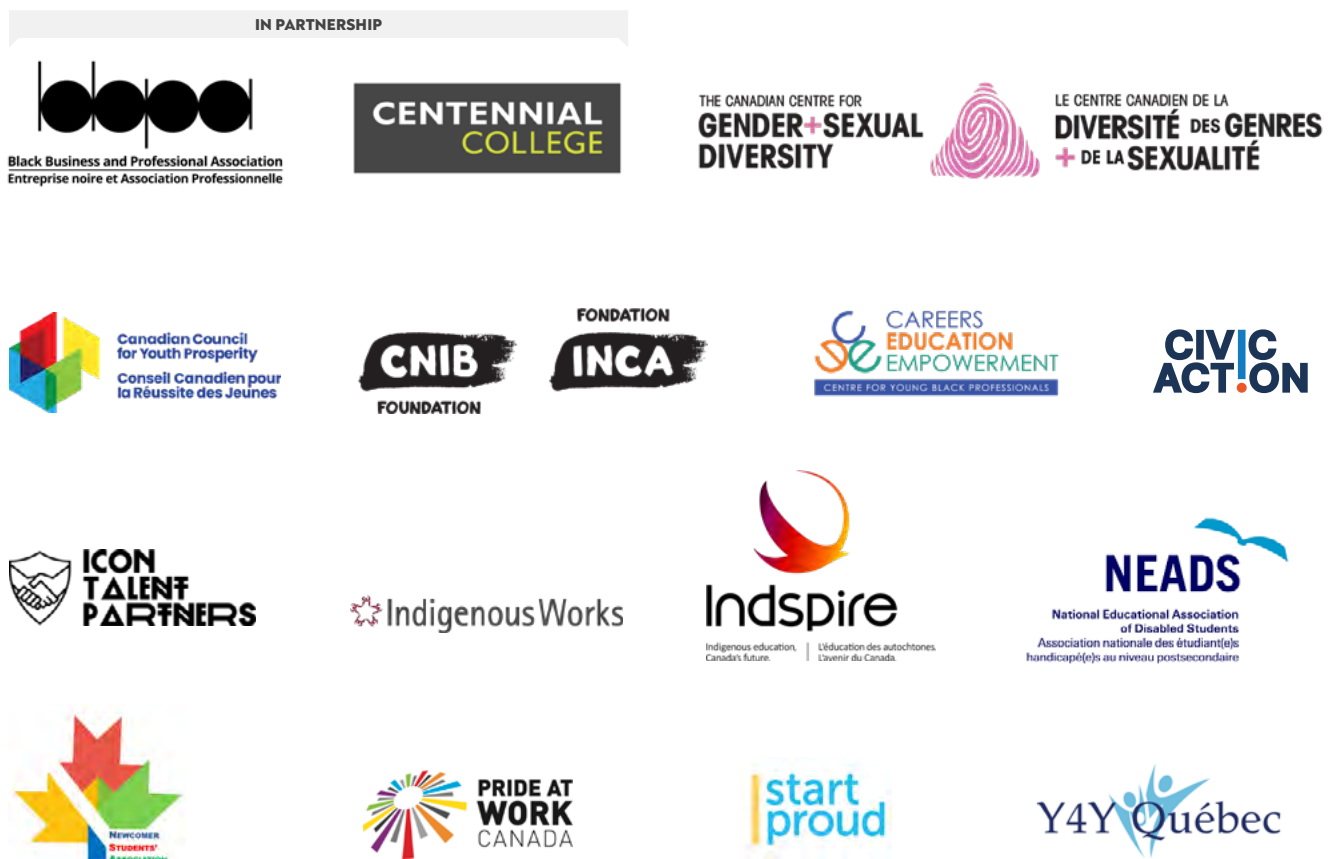## Self-identification with Equity deserving communities
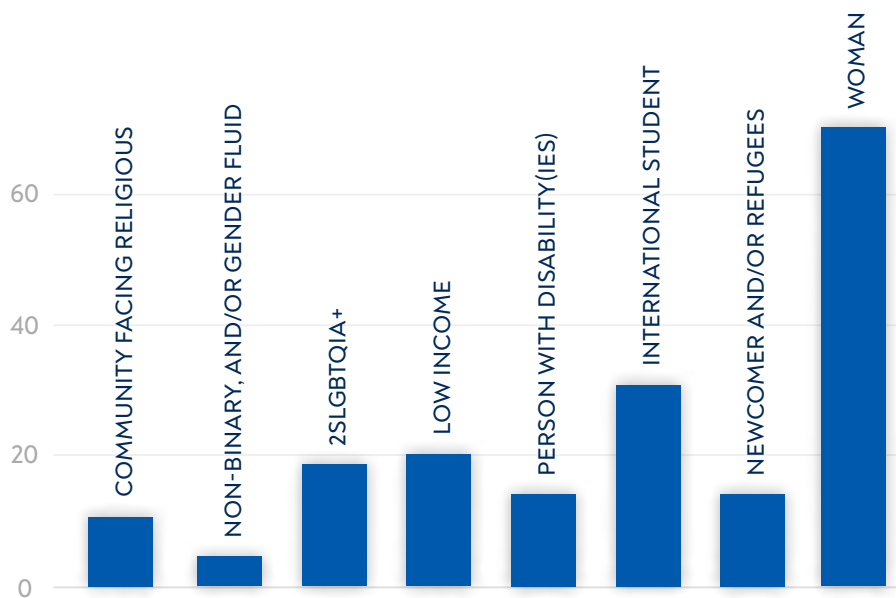
Note: Percentages do not add to 100 as participants were able to choose multiple options.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIS)

We conducted 16 KIIs with senior leadership from 15 non-profit organizations and associations. These focused on:

· Barriers and needs of WIL stakeholders (i.e., employers, WIL practitioners, post-secondary institutions, community organizations)

· Barriers and needs of WIL students and recent graduates

· COVID impacts on barriers and needs

· Actionable strategies and opportunities for equitable COVID recovery through WIL

· Ongoing priorities for research and development

ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED IN THE KIIS INCLUDED:

IN PARTNERSHIP

Black Business and Professional Association
Entreprise noire et Association Professionnelle

CENTENNIAL COLLEGE

THE CANADIAN CENTRE FOR GENDER+SEXUAL DIVERSITY

LE CENTRE CANADIEN DE LA DIVERSITÉ DES GENRES + DE LA SEXUALITÉ

Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity
Conseil Canadien pour la Réussite des Jeunes

CNIB FOUNDATION

FONDATION INCA

CAREERS EDUCATION EMPOWERMENT
CENTRE FOR YOUNG BLACK PROFESSIONALS

CIVIC ACTION

ICON TALENT PARTNERS

Indigenous Works

Indspire
Indigenous education, Canada's future. | L'éducation des autochtones. L'avenir du Canada.

NEADS
National Educational Association of Disabled Students
Association nationale des étudiant(e)s handicapé(e)s au niveau postsecondaire

Newcomer Students' Association

PRIDE AT WORK CANADA

start proud

Y4Y Québec