BUSINESS + HIGHER EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

Student Stories, Employer Priorities:
The WIL Experience

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This resource is part of a *Student Stories, Employer Priorities* series where 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.

Click here for our series overview.

Learn more at bher.ca

Overview

Building a more equitable and inclusive WIL ecosystem is not just about increasing representation. It's about what happens through the entire WIL lifecycle: whether and how we embed equity and inclusion into the design of quality WIL experiences . The quality of experience has the potential to impede or build pathways for equity-deserving communities who are up against unique barriers as they try to break into meaningful career paths, and also impacts where they choose to stay.

To address inclusion and belonging in support of quality WIL experiences, in this resource we share stories and insights from students and EDI leaders about challenges and priorities for WIL practitioners and especially employers.

We heard from students and EDI leaders alike that there is still significant work to do when it comes to cultural competence and providing the basic and wraparound supports that ensure students thrive. Empathetic WIL supervisors, integrated supports between school and WIL, flexible WIL options, and inclusive, genuine mentorship opportunities are central to student needs.

WORKPLACE CULTURE STILL HAS A WAYS TO GO.

In workplaces or WIL environments with limited diversity, which is the norm rather than the exception, students felt it took a longer time and more effort to feel comfortable if they ever got there. Students with childcare responsibilities, visible disabilities, lower quality Internet, or a lack of private office space often felt judged and misunderstood by colleagues. Students also shared stories of racism and microaggression. These experiences have myriad harmful and compounding impacts. For example, they damage student confidence and negatively impact engagement, performance, and development opportunities. It can also make them question the entire culture of an organization or program and deter them from staying on after their WIL.

Despite the flexibility and accessibility of remote work, being in a virtual WIL environment often didn't help with communication needs and providing the quality experiences students are after.

Most students we spoke to that were able to complete WILs during COVID did so in a virtual environment. And that environment was tough.

Many students felt like they were being pushed to their limits - taking on additional roles and responsibilities that weren't part of their job description because organizations were in 'panic mode. Some felt the ambiguity in job descriptions (i.e. "able to take on additional responsibilities at the discretion of their supervisor") made it easier for supervisors to take advantage of students and push them into tasks they weren't ready for and that ultimately could, or did, hurt their job performance.

"Throughout the pandemic opportunities for Learning and Development during WILs has really become more 'transactional' - it's more about just giving people work to do independently. The ability to have open conversations with supervisors and continue to grow and learn in roles has been negatively impacted because of COVID."

~ Prairie University Student

Students also felt they lost out on skill development opportunities. Students recognize the value of human skills and professional norms, not just technical skills, and look to learn these through WILs. But many felt they couldn't develop these human skills in the ways they would through in-person WILs, including through spontaneous exposure to training and development opportunities, like job shadowing, or informal mentorship.

Open communication is a need that felt more challenging through the pandemic. Many students aren't sure how to communicate their needs or concerns with their supervisors, and question what is even appropriate to bring up. Students shared experiences of discrimination or personal crises that affected their work, all while feeling like they didn't have anyone to talk to about their needs. Students can be fearful of advocating for themselves, and often face feelings of precarity about their employment and future prospects, both because of their status as temporary, entry level workers and as members of communities that are often marginalized in school and work.

Lost opportunities for professional development: WIL often provides students with networking opportunities that can help them develop professionally and bring awareness to opportunities available post-WIL. Yet the challenges with getting to know colleagues virtually and the loss of events where networking tends to happen meant this was a lot more difficult to do. Students felt they really missed out on experiences they needed to build the social capital they may be lacking given the lived realities and systemic inequities they face.

"I wasn't sure how to approach having conversations with my superior. It was hard to have conversations about payment and contracts. I wasn't sure how to approach that, and it took me a while to learn."

~ BC College Student

"If it wasn't for COVID, I could have connected well with other members of the team as well and could have gotten to know them better because right now it's just professional: meeting to meeting, work task to work task."

~ Central Canada College Student

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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Students and EDI leaders spoke to the need for the WIL community to adopt an EDI mindset: to acknowledge the realities and needs unique to individual students and larger equity-deserving communities and to be willing to respond to these needs. This can happen through structured, quality communication and supports, especially from WIL supervisors and in collaboration with co-op and career offices, inclusive mentorship programs, and flexible WIL opportunities offered by employers and/or via WIL offices and on-campus WIL opportunities.

Priorities to improve the WIL experience:

Continued focus on representation by employers is still important, even in environments with inclusive, positive cultures. Representation comes not only in the people present but the ways in which communities and cultures are embedded into the day-to-day (e.g. acknowledgement of all religious holidays and days of cultural or historical significance).

Strategies to improve communication between employers and students that encourage students to provide feedback, both positive and negative, to their supervisor, someone in a neutral position at their organization, or their WIL coordinator. Students want safe spaces within their workplaces to have open conversations about their experiences, and the reassurance that doing so won't have negative repercussions. There is a need for:

- Reassurances from the start from WIL supervisors, that it is ok to communicate the need for accommodations, and for students to self-advocate and speak their truth. These reassurances go a long way, especially since initial difficulties or 'failures' can feel catastrophic for students hoping to impress in their first career-related opportunity.

"I have found when there is diverse management who are aware of diversity it trickles down to the employees. It's remarkable the difference between company A and B if one has representation in management. It's very helpful."

~ Prairie College Student

"Being a student, you don't feel safe giving feedback. If you're unhappy, you still understand that you need to carry on. It's your only reference from the field right now. If you mess it up, you continue just pretending like everything's fine. I felt like I couldn't properly give any feedback because I didn't know if my co-op officer would say something to my boss and if it would affect the way my boss treats me."

~ BC College

- Resources on how to have difficult conversations with supervisors, clear communication norms and best practices to help with self-advocacy and know ing your rights as a worker for students, and employer resources on how to do the same, in culturally appropriate ways.

Inclusive mentorship opportunities provided by WIL employers and/or institutions, as appropriate for the type of WIL programming. Mentorship is invaluable to professional development , and is especially helpful for students from equity-deserving communities as avigate additional barriers. Mentors can also:

lp students build social capital, develop career als, and navigate networking and communicating h their supervisors and colleagues;

a point of contact for students to share experienc- ask questions, and learn about professional norms;

ve meaningful impact on how a student sees the rkforce and their attitude/approach towards WIL; and

vide students with a safe space to talk about ir experiences, receive feedback, and increase fidence.

rship relationships are more meaningful when is an element of choice or 'matchmaking' involved, ially when the mentor and mentee are from the equity-seeking community or have similar lived iences. This means there needs to be some level ibility as to where mentors come from—especially e isn't the representation students need in their

"Mentorship has a big big impact on how you see the workforce, how you see your placement and how you see where you're going. If you have a terrible Mentor who is non-inclusive, is non cooperative and isn't interested in being a mentor, then your whole experience is going to be very poor. If you're in a placement even where you have doubts or it's not exactly where you saw yourself, but you have an amazing Mentor, that could completely change your experience."

~ Northern College Student

"Formal mentorship could be more embedded into the WIL experience, the last couple of years of post-secondary, or in other systemic ways."

~ EDI Leader

For more on how quality mentorship, check out our WIL Mentorship resources here.

WIL organizations—balanced with appropriate vetting of strong, engaged mentors. When mentors aren't from the same community as their mentees, cultural competency is key: mentors should be actively aware of their own privileges and make concerted efforts to check-in and ask questions instead of making assumptions about performance or experience with professional norms.

A willingness of institutions and/or WIL employers to integrate student benefits (e.g. competitive compensation, scholarship or bursary opportunities) across different types of non-curricular WIL programming and to **look at flexible, innovative models of WIL** that can be built into curriculum, like interdisciplinary industry projects. Although equity and inclusion considerations still need to be front of mind as innovative WILs develop and scale, the flexibility of these WILs mean they can integrate better into the realities of students' lives and help bridge them into structured placements. Moreover, a longer term focus on embedding curricular WILs into all programming can improve access to opportunities.

Ongoing options for hybrid work. While remote work can address some challenges of WIL access, needs vary with the reality of each student, employer, and placement. Optional days in-person allow for 'renewed' onboarding—a rewarding experience we heard from some students who were able to spend some time in person during their WIL placements— and allow for more flexible working arrangements that suit the needs of students in more equitable ways—something that wouldn't have been possible in a pre-COVID world. Employers will also need to monitor for unintended consequences of hybrid work on equity and inclusion, like WIL students who work primarily remotely potentially missing out on informal mentorship or development opportunities.

"I think having a hybrid model where you at least get some face time with your supervisor is needed. You will get to implement some of the things you have learned in the classroom on the job even if it's for a few hours."

~ BC University Student

"There's a disconnect between recruitment, onboarding, and EDI training and setting performance expectations. Employers don't integrate EDI considerations into our performance evaluation especially in tech companies and startups. There's a lack of cultural understanding and put this students and WIL candidates at a disadvantage when it comes to performance metrics."

~ Central Canada University Student

Employers and WIL practitioners need to marry quality WIL approaches with responsiveness to equity and inclusion gaps.

- **Institutions and WIL practitioners** need to continue to ensure students from equity-deserving communities have structured goal setting, check-ins, training and development, and formal reflective practices, while employers embed accessibility, accommodations, and wraparound services that extend from school to work to address mental health, cultural, identity-based, or other needs into the workplace experience and are serious at all levels about zero tolerance for discrimination and mistreatment.

- Supervisor support can make or break WILs. **Even through experiences of microaggressions or discrimination, empathy, understanding, and having someone advocating on their behalf helped make their overall WIL experience a positive one.**

- It's also critical that employers work on **embedding an EDI mindset into organizations or programs as a whole.** This comes from dedication to go beyond short-term training or 'box checking' exercises to longer term capacity building and a willingness to listen to, understand, and integrate the insights from equity-deserving communities about what should change and why.

"I always ask students, when are you most productive in the day? And you can tell, from their reaction "nobody has ever asked me that question." It comes down to treating your WIL students as people. They're only there for a short period of time, but you want to maximize the experience for them during and post COVID."

~ EDI Leader

"I had a good experience with my supervisor and I strongly suspect that's because of their own personal experience with marginalized, racialized communities and not anything their company actually went out of their way to equip people with. If I had worked for that same company, but had a different supervisor, there's a strong chance I would have had a completely different experience."

~ Central Canada University Student

For more on embedding an EDI mindset into the workplace, see our companion employer EDI guide here.

WIL students are looking for more empathetic, compassionate approaches to WIL experiences and a willingness from employers and career and co-op offices to provide high quality, inclusive experiences whether remote, in person, or hybrid. Since COVID and the shift to remote work pushed post-secondaries and employers to be more flexible, students and EDI leaders alike believe we're at a hopeful moment to continue to be flexible and intentional about work environments that benefit students, employers, and practitioners.

We've heard about the priorities from the students and EDI leaders that lent us their time and expertise.

Now is the time to respond with cross-ecosystem solutions – to develop, implement, and evaluate the impact of strategies for equitable and inclusive WIL experiences.

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