



**BUSINESS
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ROUNDTABLE

EQUITY, DIVERSITY, & INCLUSION IN WORK - INTEGRATED LEARNING

Student Stories, Employer Priorities: WIL Awareness & Access



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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

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences can help address some of the barriers that equity-deserving students face when entering the job market—but many students are unaware of the WIL opportunities out there or just don't know where to start to access them. These challenges are not new, but they've been exposed, and in some ways exacerbated, by COVID.

In this resource we share stories and insights from students and EDI leaders about challenges and priorities for WIL practitioners and employers to improve awareness of, and access to, WILs.

When it comes to WIL we have to start at the start.

We need a deeper understanding of how post-secondaries, WIL practitioners, and employers can work together to increase student awareness and make WILs better available and easily accessible to equity-deserving communities. Within this is a need for inclusive student engagement that truly connects with equity-deserving communities and helps them see the value—and themselves—in WILs.

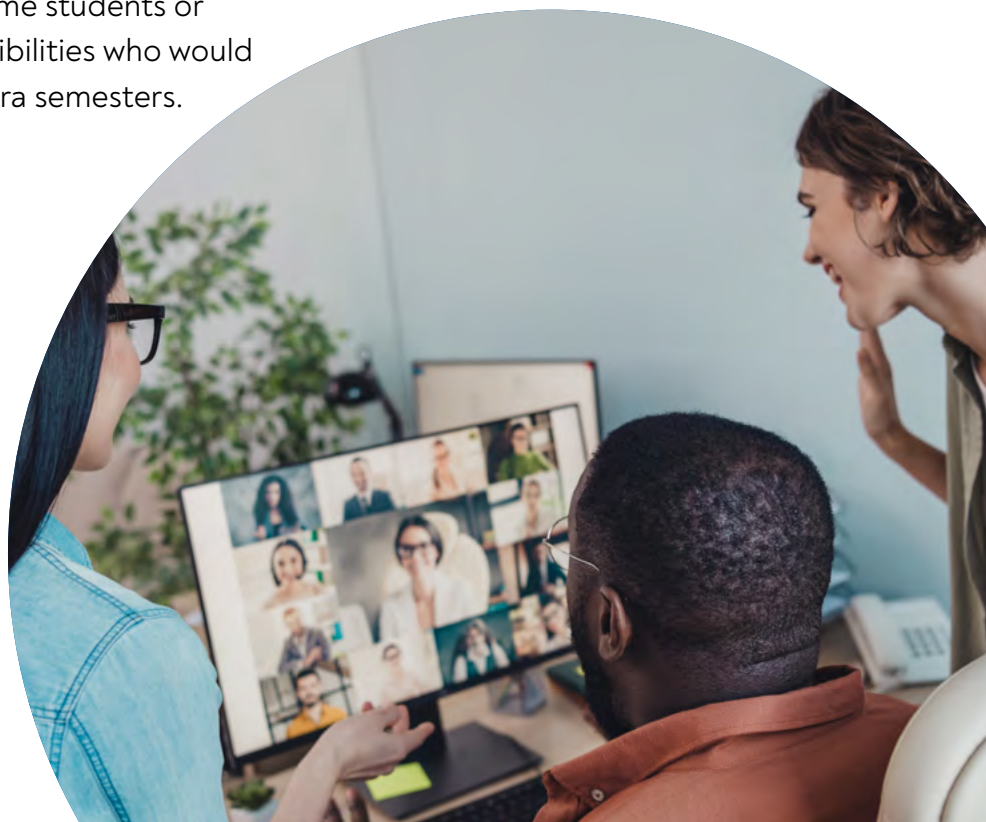
AWARENESS GAPS AND MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT WIL GET IN THE WAY OF ACCESS.

Students, especially in programs without curricular or mandatory WILs, are often unclear about or unaware of the WIL opportunities available. Or they just don't see WILs as being 'for them'. There are misperceptions about the kinds of WILs out there. For example, many students in programs without a mandatory WIL component are unaware of emerging, innovative WIL opportunities like case competitions and only know WIL as structured work-term placements. Often, they believe that they can't participate in or wouldn't be a competitive candidate for WILs that aren't directly related to their program.

We also heard about awareness gaps from students with mandatory WILs driven by a lack of communication or support from instructors and coordinators about how to start the process of securing placements, especially during COVID. This would put students at risk of delaying their placements and in turn graduation, an especially difficult challenge for low-income students or students with financial responsibilities who would then have to pay tuition for extra semesters.

"If a WIL placement is able to create more awareness about the benefits and how they can help students actually get some experience in their field of interest, then that would really help overcome some of the barriers for students."

~ Atlantic University Student



EVEN WHEN STUDENTS ARE AWARE OF WHAT'S OUT THERE, MANY COME UP AGAINST DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGH BARRIERS TO ACCESSING WILs.

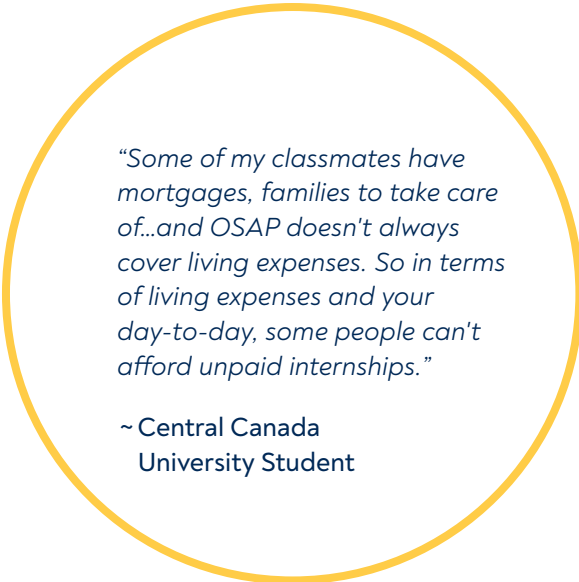
Structural inequities, like the lived realities and demands of day-to-day life—from financial to caretaker responsibilities—for many students from equity deserving communities also impact the time, capacity, and ability to even consider participating in WILs, especially through the pandemic.

Students from equity-deserving communities also often feel they lack pre-experience or the social capital needed to get exposure to or secure WILs, like informal mentors to help them navigate the post-secondary system or the right connections to secure high quality, paid WILs.

The challenges of WIL compensation

We heard across most roundtables about the challenges and marginalizing impacts of unpaid/underpaying WILs. Students from lower income backgrounds or with financial responsibilities in mandatory, unpaid, program-based WILs shared the financial risk this puts them in. Those without mandatory WIL placements shared that they have to prioritize paid work and are left with little time or capacity to access co-curricular commitments, like case competitions, or unpaid optional placements. This means the number of opportunities accessible to them are immediately limited or they are forced to make financial sacrifices in other parts of their lives if they want to participate in WILs. And during COVID, the breakdown in access to childcare supports, for example, made taking care of the day-to-day basics increasingly challenging and further limited the ability to participate in WILs.

We also heard about a persistent, problematic narrative that students from equity-deserving communities ought to be grateful for any opportunities that come their way. This narrative perpetuates barriers to access.



“Some of my classmates have mortgages, families to take care of...and OSAP doesn’t always cover living expenses. So in terms of living expenses and your day-to-day, some people can’t afford unpaid internships.”

~ Central Canada
University Student

Even for paid WILs, in-person placements can require students to uproot their lives and absorb significant moving expenses for a 4- or 5-month term. This can be cost prohibitive for students that can't find local or remote WILs. It's also not feasible or culturally appropriate for many students that have family or caretaker responsibilities, or that live in First Nation reserves, or remote and/or rural communities.

As long as placement-based and co-curricular WILs are misaligned with the financial realities and needs of students from equity-deserving communities, underrepresentation will continue to be the reality and opportunities will continue to favour students with the means and privilege to access them.

Through COVID many students found it was even more difficult to learn about or get inroads to WIL opportunities because of the loss of informal exposure to WILs that comes from being on campus.

They also experienced:

- **Less capacity from post-secondaries to provide the supports that students need, like accessibility supports or easy to find resources. Missing upstream supports can disrupt pathways into WIL.**
- **Reduced access points to WIL, like networking and recruitment events, that many equity-deserving students rely on to get their foot in the door.**
- **Digital fatigue, pandemic burnout, and limited motivation to engage in what virtual access points were available or to chase down opportunities in a difficult to navigate system of opportunities at their schools.**
- **A loss of access to campus high-speed Internet and/or digital tools and infrastructure, and a lack of these in home environments. This is often for financial reasons and/or from a lack of local infrastructure in rural and remote regions.**

"The problem is short term [in person] WILs as well. People aren't necessarily willing to take them on because if it's only for four or five months, they're not able to move closer to their job for that. So then they lose out on a lot of opportunities because they have no way of getting there or it's going to take longer to get there. If it takes me two hours to get to a job, then I'm going to do it only for four weeks, what's the point?"

~ EDI Leader

"COVID impacted access for equity-seeking communities even further because the youth who already had access to or knowledge of services pre-COVID were even more inclined to search online for these as opposed to youth who pre-COVID didn't know these resources, so they didn't know where to look online either. It's just a vicious cycle."

~ EDI Leader

These are also the kinds of things employers are often unaware of or, even unintentionally, fail to take into consideration as they build their WIL programs (e.g. flexibility, meaningful compensation) and look for WIL students (e.g. the communities their advertisements reach, how recruitment events are designed, the language in job advertisements, etc.).

Rigid eligibility criteria, like preferences for Canadian citizens, permanent residents, and university students, also limit the number of opportunities available to many students, including international students. And many felt (or have the perception) that WIL employers prefer students from programs like business, engineering, and computer science over social science and humanities programs, also the programs where equity-deserving communities are overrepresented.¹



The unique experiences of international students

During our roundtables, we were privileged to speak with many international students, hear their stories and learn about the unique challenges they face in accessing WIL. This includes culture shock and unfamiliarity with the Canadian labour market—all while completing school and adapting to life in a new country, often on their own. Cultural differences and language barriers also make it more difficult to learn about and look for WILs and impact students' confidence in pursuing opportunities, especially in the absence of in-person networking opportunities.

Restrictions on the number of hours international students can work also prevent them from participating in full-time WILs—WILs that are more likely to offer competitive pay and structured work experiences. Plus, WIL opportunities are not always made available to international students. Or they require Canadian work experience that many international students can't possibly have.

During COVID, many students at least early on had to attend school from their home countries and became disconnected from their school communities and what little support was still available in person—further distancing students from WIL opportunities. But we also heard success stories about employment programs that target international students. These are the kinds of initiatives that help address structural barriers and create inroads for students.

"Out of the four years, it took me three years to actually understand what Canadian culture is. And if you look at Canadian companies right now, a lot of time their hiring is about the culture fit, right? As international students and newcomers, how can you get that culture fit if you weren't exposed and don't have guided support?"

~ Central Canada
University Student

"I failed to secure a placement during the pandemic and it was very disheartening. Something I noticed was that some of my friends who were from Canada, they had connections to their family or friends and they were finally able to secure a job. Whereas, being an international student, I didn't know too many people here and that was very discouraging to see."

~ Prairie, University Student

"This provincial government created an International Student Summer Employment Program. This is the first time there was something to support international students...I feel that there should be more of these programs created by governments to help International students to find jobs in their relevant field."

~ Atlantic University Student

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Students and EDI leaders spoke to the need for more inclusive engagement strategies and relationship-building between employers, WIL practitioners, and students/community groups themselves. Bringing students into WILs isn't just about getting information in front of students—it's about meeting students where they are and removing the burden of access.

Priorities to improve awareness and access

Individualized career and/or co-op supports from WIL and career offices for all students, not just mandatory WIL programs, to help students find opportunities aligned with their interests, skills, and lived realities and **wraparound services and confidence-building initiatives** that are built into the core supports provided by career and WIL offices.

Targeted WIL 'matchmaker' campaigns that connect equity-deserving students to the WIL opportunities that already *are* relevant to their immediate needs and realities. Career fairs and networking events that are **hosted/co-hosted by on-campus associations that equity-deserving communities are already tapped into** and that bring together employers/program leads that offer both paid and volunteer, short term and long term opportunities are also needed.

Efforts by WIL practitioners and employers to build genuine relationships with:

- **Students** through existing student or community groups, like EDI-focused student associations and community organizations that already service students. This is especially important for employers with limited connections to students and campuses, and particularly valuable for connecting with Northern and remote student communities.
- **Each other** so that WIL practitioners better understand and anticipate the foundational skills needs of employers and can help students match with the right employers. This communication will ensure

"I'm thinking of stuff where they [career offices] helped with your resume building. They also provided examples to me. I had 10 different examples, real examples of people's resumes that were hired through different programs. So having actual examples to follow really helps, not just instructions and stuff to do like formatting."


~ Central Canada
College Student

"Have employers speak with students from the newer generation because we have so much to say and we're open and we have ideas on how to collaborate to make this [access barriers] less of an issue. And if only they were open to hearing us then what a better place the world of WIL would be."


~ Central Canada
University Student

that employers have a better grasp on how they can adapt and accommodate their WILs to the needs and realities of students that WIL practitioners may be better positioned to understand (e.g. accommodation needs and resources). WIL practitioner-employer partnerships can also shed light on program and financial support available to small and medium enterprises who are looking to launch, grow, or sustain WIL programming.

Intentional, EDI-centered marketing of co-curricular and placement-based WILs from language in WIL ads to finding the communication channels students actually use. This should emphasize the value of WIL opportunities for equity-deserving communities, and provide reassurance that they belong (e.g., that international students are eligible, accommodations are built into the work environment, or that work hours and locations are flexible). Misperceptions about the types of WILs out there and who suits them also need to be debunked because students need to know that WILs come in all forms and from across industries. Finally, students in mandatory WIL programs need stronger communications and more convenient, user-friendly channels to help them access quality, competitive WIL placements at the right times.



For more on how employers can address financial barriers to WIL participation, check out our Financial Supports Catalogue [here](#).



For more on actionable strategies and solutions, see our companion employer EDI guide [here](#).

Getting students aware of and into WIL positions is important not only for the success of students, but for improved employer access to the talent they need to recover from the impacts of COVID in an inclusive, sustainable way.

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

Now is the time to bring together post-secondaries, WIL practitioners, and employers to respond with ecosystem solutions to develop, implement, and evaluate the impact of equitable and inclusive awareness and access strategies.





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