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EQUITY, DIVERSITY, & INCLUSION IN WORK - INTEGRATED LEARNING

Student Stories, Employer Priorities:
WIL Recruitment &
Onboarding



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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

Students from equity-deserving communities that were able to connect to placement-based WIL opportunities throughout COVID faced systemic barriers and discrimination in recruitment processes. Onboarding into career-focused experiences often for the first time and in a remote world further compounded unique, systemic barriers faced by equity-deserving communities.

In this resource we share stories and insights from students and EDI leaders about challenges and priorities for WIL practitioners and employers to debias recruitment and improve onboarding experiences in placement-based WILs.

We also heard about various ways to address these barriers, from interrupting biases in recruitment and being more intentional and student-centered about onboarding, to empathetic WIL supervisors who are willing to understand the lived experiences of students from equity-deserving communities and respond to needs. We can learn from these success stories to action positive change.

TRADITIONAL RECRUITMENT PRACTICES ARE EXCLUSIONARY BUT STILL THE NORM.

When it comes to recruitment into placement-based WILs (co-ops, internships, externships, work experiences, etc.), job descriptions, candidate expectations, interview processes, and accessibility accommodation practices continue to be biased against the lived experiences and realities of students from equity-deserving communities.

More often than not, these issues come from the way recruitment practices have been built—they're implicitly biased about who is engaged and how candidates are evaluated. But these biases aren't always immediately obvious to the employers making decisions and the WIL practitioners helping to match students to placements.

Recruitment biases can look like:

Pressure to assimilate: To get their foot in the door, students often feel the need to change things about their resumes to avoid discrimination. For example, students with names that aren't anglophone might anglicize their names. Or students with 'tells' on their resume—like being older than the average WIL applicant, or a volunteer with 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations—sometimes feel they need to hide experiences or parts of who they are to secure placements.

Exclusionary, biased assessment: Traditional recruitment practices like large interview panels, personality tests, unstructured interviews and assessing for 'culture fit' tend to reinforce biases or discrimination (e.g. against international students who might be used to different workplace norms, or students with disabilities whose answers may be delayed due to the use of assistive technology) in favour of candidates who already mirror the make-up of an organization, fit Western-centric norms or ableist expectations about skills and potential, have prior work experience, or come from preferred programs.

"As an international student I can say I have been in a couple of interviews and in the end I haven't been selected because I don't have the Canadian experience. As a student, I think they should consider me purely on my skills and what I am willing to do for them and how much am I bringing to the table for the company."

~ Central Canada College Student

"One of the comments I received, when I sent my resume to one of the biomedical sciences companies, they told me 'from your resume, it seems like you are old. So that's why we didn't hire you.'"

~ Atlantic University Student

"Employers tend to be subtle about bias. If someone is gender nonconforming or visibly trans, they bear the brunt of prejudice because they're not flying under the radar during interview processes. We consistently see people coming back to us saying, oh, I was told I was not the right fit or I was an unconventional hire."

~ EDI Leader

Skills articulation gaps: While the ability to identify and effectively communicate skills and experiences is invaluable for students, the burden of responsibility to do so in ways that counter biases or preconceived notions employers might have is often put on students. We heard that employers don't always reorient their expectations for WIL students and instead look for related work experience or polished skills when these are the very things students are looking to develop. Moreover, equity-deserving communities are less likely to have had career-related opportunities in the first place.

Little consideration for lived realities: Factors like mobility limitations, low internet access, and financial and caretaker responsibilities impact the accessibility and ease of moving through recruitment and hiring requirements, such as police or medical checks. This is especially true for students in rural, remote, and Northern communities where access to services is limited, especially during COVID. Students feel there is pressure to complete pre-requirements quickly and without questions and have very real fears of losing their WIL placements if anything goes wrong during these processes.

Limited feedback: Many students don't hear back after interviews. They're left wondering why they didn't get a position or how they could improve at a time where this feedback is so critical for getting their foot in the door. They might fill in the blanks with reasons like a lack of skills or potential or discrimination, leading to a vicious cycle of negative self-confidence and 'imposter' feelings. This is especially discouraging for students trying to break into the job market while already up against many barriers.

"In the work I do now I get to see the onboarding processes for new students at a company that targets rural and remote communities. I personally didn't know that the internet was so terrible there and when people were late for meetings I assumed they were up late and didn't care about the job. When I learned they couldn't get their Internet working I felt so bad. We need to learn more about realities in those rural and remote communities beforehand."

~ Central Canada College Student

"There used to be a summer jobs program where, for some reason, you had to be working full-time in the job and you had to be returning to school full time. Programs like this pose barriers for a lot of disabled students because many might not consistently attend school full time, and are automatically ineligible for large programs like this."

~ EDI Leader

"I don't understand. I feel confident in the interviews and then I get a message saying, sorry, you're not selected, without any reasons. And then I wonder is it because I'm from India? Is this because I am Brown? And those reasons pile up and I need to know instead where I'm actually lacking."

~ Central Canada College Student

"One of the barriers we face is the lack of feedback after applying to a job. Sometimes we won't even get an answer so you don't even know. Your application is just pending and you're waiting. It would be great if they tell you why you didn't get the job so you can improve for the next time."

~ Atlantic University Student

Though not always explicit, students felt discrimination and bias was present just under the surface. **These kinds of experiences have harmful impacts**—they're demotivating for pursuing WILs and can continue to keep equity-deserving students out of opportunities.

FOR STUDENTS THAT WERE ABLE TO SECURE WILS, ONBOARDING OFTEN SET THE TONE FOR THE REST OF THEIR WIL EXPERIENCE.

Through COVID, many students felt they were left to fend for themselves during onboarding.

Many students spoke highly of post-secondary supports like wraparound services (e.g. mental health, accommodations) and resources around strategies for success. A number, though, also felt that these supports weren't as readily accessible during the pandemic and often weren't provided by employers. We also heard stories of students who, once they started their placements, felt they had unclear expectations about their role and little to no knowledge about accessibility accommodations or employee rights, especially when policies were unique to WIL students and not common knowledge among other colleagues.

Orientation days that ease students into the work environment and allow them to get to know the people they'll be working with were also lost or cut down on time or quality—an especially difficult challenge for students with little to no knowledge of or experience working in Canada or in industries related to their career goals (e.g. international students, first generation post-secondary students, etc.).



"I think one major issue that is faced by most students who have started their WIL during the pandemic is not having the usual orientation days we normally would, which really help us ease into the work environment by making us comfortable and allowing us to get to know the people we're working with."

~ BC University Student

Students also felt their home life was immediately ‘exposed’—especially if they didn’t have private workspaces or stable internet—and were concerned this would reflect poorly on them as employees. We heard about instances during virtual onboarding where students were told their backgrounds would have to be more ‘appropriate’ or they’d need to find a quieter space. While these are ideal, they’re not the reality for a lot of students. This is a clear example of how a lack of understanding or awareness on the part of employers can manifest as workplace exclusions.

Many hoped for more support from WIL supervisors – or at least an acknowledgement that onboarding into the workforce for the first time is a challenge in and of itself, let alone during a pandemic. Remote work requires a different set of skills that leans heavily on prior in-person experience, so many students did not feel prepared or that employers adjusted their expectations to these realities.

These initial experiences matter. A lack of support or consideration about lived realities early in a WIL can lead to anxieties about, and real impacts on, performance. **When students aren’t aware of processes and norms or don’t have the ‘scaffolding’ to bridge them into WILs, they don’t have what they need to start off on the right foot, feel confident, and thrive in their WIL.**

“Our onboarding was led by someone without experience in a people first space. They spoke to us as though the requirement was to have appropriate Zoom backgrounds and to be in a quiet space. Although that is the ideal I don’t know many students who are able to have a separate room for an office. You either got my stove or part of my bedroom as my background. I think covid made it really clear that there is a lot more going on in people’s lives.”

~ Central Canada
University Student



WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Students and EDI leaders spoke to the need for debiased recruitment and assessment of WIL students, EDI-focused, quality onboarding strategies/standards, and improved pathways for international students. Through it all there needs to be continuous, integrated support and aligned approaches between WIL employers/supervisors and the WIL practitioners that help students move into these opportunities.

Priorities to improve recruitment and onboarding:

Efforts to increase uptake by equity-deserving communities of existing recruitment supports

(i.e. resume building, skills-articulation) in co-op and career offices that help students find opportunities relevant to their interests and skillsets and that are sensitive to lived experiences, safe and inclusive employers/environments, and provide accessible workplaces.

WIL employers that are willing to take steps to ensure recruitment practices are student-centered, inclusive, and more equitable. This includes:

- Building universal accessibility and/or accommodations into recruitment
- De-biasing candidate assessment practices and providing candidates with feedback ; and
- Ensuring representation of equity-deserving communities on interview panels where possible.

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

Efforts from co-op and career offices and/or WIL employers to connect students with peers who have completed WIL programs

to help guide them through the recruitment and onboarding processes, as opposed to only WIL practitioners or senior staff who are further removed from the student experience.

Empathy, kindness, and reassurances from WIL employers from the start of the recruitment process. WIL employers can ensure that needing accommodations won't affect the student's 'standing' as a candidate or engage in conversations during onboarding wherein WIL supervisors proactively try to anticipate, check-in on, and address common and individual questions, concerns, and needs.

Partnerships between newer WIL employers and WIL practitioners or other 'seasoned' WIL employers with EDI success stories to share best practices for understanding and responding to the needs and realities of students and to align and continue the chain of supports provided to students from post-secondary into recruitment and onboarding.

"It's about getting to know students and giving them mentorship opportunities. Also just understanding where they are coming from, like do they have accessibility needs? We found a lot of companies don't have that capacity, especially SMEs, which form the majority of employment in Canada. They don't have the opportunity to really spend time to properly get to know their new hires and understand their needs. And if they don't perform, then you're out the door- they'll find someone else. There is certainly more work needed around onboarding and retention."

~ EDI Leader

For more on how employers can provide quality WIL onboarding, check out our Performance Assessment Strategies guide [here](#).

PATHWAYS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students often come to Canada with valuable skills and experiences that aren't formally recognized or are implicitly devalued. This limits access to employment pathways for students, and to talent for employers.

International students need champions in their corner: WIL practitioners that are equipped to help them connect to the right opportunities, and employers that will take a chance on them. But practitioners and employers themselves need help. WIL practitioners face structural barriers when placing international students, while employers face barriers to hiring, such as ineligibility for student stipends, limits on hours worked, or organizational policies about Canadian hires that are difficult to change. Efforts to increase cultural competency among employers and tackle misperceptions and biases about skills and experiences are key to make sure international students are successful in recruitment and given what they need to succeed in Canada.

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.

De-biasing recruitment and the assessment of WIL candidates and building EDI-practices into onboarding are important next steps for changing the status quo, especially as WIL practitioners push to expand different types of WIL to all students, and employers look to the role WIL can play in helping them through COVID recovery. We've heard about the priorities from the students and EDI leaders that lent us their time and expertise.





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