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2023 Final Report: An Evaluation of the Calgary WIL Pilot Project

**Prepared for the Calgary Work Integrated Learning
Secretariate**

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Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) is a Toronto-based firm providing strategic insight and guidance to governments, postsecondary institutions, and agencies through excellence and expertise in policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and strategic consulting services. Through these activities, HESA strives to improve the quality, efficacy, and fairness of higher education systems in Canada and worldwide.

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Any errors or omissions are the authors' alone.

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Executive Summary

The Calgary Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Pilot project, known as TalentED YYC, is an initiative running from April 2023 to March 2025. Operated by the Calgary WIL Secretariate under Calgary Economic Development (CED), it aims to establish a regional WIL model to bolster the sustainable labour market in Calgary. The project's core goals include increasing WIL opportunities for post-secondary students, enhancing satisfaction in recruitment processes, and expanding the number of employers offering WIL experiences. Targeting partnerships with post-secondary institutions (PSIs), community members, and businesses, TalentED YYC aims to benefit students, PSIs, employers, and the regional economy, and serve as a model for future initiatives. The project involves seven PSIs, partners with organizations like CCC and CCVO, and receives funding from federal, provincial, and municipal sources.

This evaluation report by Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) focuses on assessing the project's facilitation of partnerships among stakeholders and its current progress toward its goals. The report outlines HESA's evaluation framework, methodology, and presents 2023 activities, milestones, and stakeholder feedback, as well as a summary of successes and challenges. The report ends with conclusions and recommendations for the project team moving forward.

Project to Date and Successes

The Calgary WIL Secretariate has exhibited adaptability and collaboration in its efforts to promote WIL initiatives in the region. Key successes include building awareness of the benefits of WIL among employers and connecting stakeholders for conversation, collaboration, and educational opportunities. Recommendations emphasize continued collaboration between partners and leveraging of CED's networks to facilitate outreach and growth.

The Employer Engagement team has been particularly successful in providing support and outreach to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups, who are most in need of assistance and education to bring them into the WIL ecosystem in Calgary. Larger employers have been well-served by the team's responsiveness and the ease of the Orbis and Magnet portal, a technological interface operated by the project that streamlines the work of posting WIL opportunities across the seven PSI partner's job boards. Positive feedback from employers underscores the team's success in building strong foundations for future engagement.

The Process Enhancement team, overcoming initial challenges with buy-in from PSI WIL practitioners, has identified opportunities to support PSI staff through process mapping, issues-based workshops, and creating resources. They have deepened their relationships with PSI partners over the year and continue to facilitate collaborative learning and collective problem-solving through the Community of Practice and the *Conversations on Calgary WIL* workshop series. They are currently fostering conversations to develop a WIL practitioner network with the potential to scale out of Calgary, similar to a provincial WIL network in neighbouring British Columbia.

The Marketing and Communications team plays a pivotal role in establishing the TalentED YYC brand. They continue to navigate the challenges of introducing WIL to an unfamiliar employer environment and refining outreach strategies and messaging. The team's monthly reports are crucial data sources for HESA and other stakeholders. The team faces the ongoing task of clarifying TalentED YYC's identity and adapting strategies to engage diverse audiences.

The Research and Evaluation team contributes to the project by tackling the portal's data collection challenges, working with other teams to provide required information for funders, and conducting student surveys. They collaborate with external entities like Stone-Olafson for market research, and coordinate with HESA for ongoing project evaluation.

All teams demonstrate integral contributions in the development of a WIL ecosystem in Calgary.

Challenges and Recommendations for Moving Forward

The Orbis and Magnet portal, initially envisioned as a comprehensive solution, faced challenges and fell short of expectations. However, for large companies familiar with WIL, the portal streamlined processes effectively. Moving forward, the portal should be considered as one tool among many, catering better to specific needs. Contextual challenges, such as low employer awareness of WIL benefits and the specter of the Government of Alberta's (GoA) performance-based funding tied to WIL programming, are acknowledged as ongoing. Recommendations include focusing on community education, maintaining communication with the GoA, and advocating for clearer definitions and parameters of WIL from the GoA.

The Employer Engagement team's success with engaged employers forms a solid foundation for future growth. Emphasizing employer education and communication with PSIs is crucial for sustained success. The Process Enhancement team's workshops and collaborative efforts within the CoP contribute to the WIL ecosystem's development. Leveraging the CoP for collective problem-solving and knowledge-sharing is key. The report calls for ongoing efforts to bridge gaps between PSIs at different stages of WIL programming, bringing PSIs into conversation with employers to assess matching needs, advocating for increased funding for PSIs to grow their WIL programming, and proposing alternative WIL activities—like innovative WIL—to meet varied institutional needs.

Conclusion

The Calgary WIL Secretariate, despite challenges, has made significant strides in building a foundation for a thriving WIL ecosystem. Successes in employer engagement, community education, and collaborative initiatives with PSIs demonstrate the Secretariate's commitment to its goals. Recommendations underscore the importance of continued collaboration, adaptability, and advocacy to address challenges and foster sustained growth. The report sets a positive trajectory for the Secretariate, emphasizing the importance of collective efforts in shaping the future of work-integrated learning in Calgary.

The evaluation acknowledges the importance of considering future scalability but recommends the current focus on meeting stakeholders' expectations and optimizing the pilot project. Lessons from prior evaluations, stakeholder feedback, and recommendations throughout the report may guide potential directions. While some large employers express interest in scaling, every PSI staff prefers maintaining the current course. The report suggests applying learned lessons in the next project phase, anticipating a stronger foundation for scaling considerations in the subsequent evaluation, and emphasizes the need for a theory of change to address unique challenges during potential scale-up.

1. Introduction

The Calgary WIL Pilot Project/TalentED YYC

The Calgary Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Pilot project (also known as TalentED YYC) aims to develop a regional WIL model to contribute to the sustainable labour market in Calgary. It is running from April 2023 to March 2025. In service of this aim, the project has three core goals: one, to increase the quantity, diversity, and quality of WIL opportunities for post-secondary students in the city; two, to enhance the satisfaction of employers, students, and post-secondary institutions with recruitment and onboarding processes on all sides; and three, to grow the number of employers offering WIL opportunities. TalentED YYC is operated by the Calgary WIL Secretariate out of Calgary Economic Development (CED). The Secretariate intends to establish a labour market pathway through the facilitation of partnerships with local postsecondary institutions, community members, and business owners.

A rationale for this pilot project is to attempt an innovative approach to develop a WIL model to bridge a gap between the participating PSIs, community members, and employers. The objectives of this pilot project are to formulate a model structure, enable partnerships among the stakeholders, and support the WIL community capacity in Calgary. There are five direct beneficiaries of the project's work:

1. The students who have greater access to more—and more diverse—WIL opportunities in Calgary;
2. PSIs which can connect with more employers to facilitate these opportunities through a shared online portal;
3. Employers who can grow or build their capacity for offering and benefiting from WIL experiences;
4. The Calgary regional economy which benefits both from a future labour pool with more relevant hands-on training and skill sets and from retaining Calgary youths and post-secondary students through increased immersion in the city's employment ecosystem;
5. Any future jurisdiction or region which can learn from this project and potentially implement a similar initiative.

Operating out of CED, the project's main stakeholders are employers, followed by post-secondary institutions and their students. Seven PSIs in Calgary are part of the project: the Alberta University of the Arts, Ambrose University, Bow Valley College, Mount Royal University, the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, St. Mary's University, and the University of Calgary. Additional partners are the Calgary Chamber of Commerce (CCC) and the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (CCVO). The project has several funders that span all levels of government: Future Skills Centre, Prairies Can, and Business Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) (all federal); the Government of Alberta (provincial); and CED (municipal).

The project was originally known by two names, the Calgary WIL Pilot Project for PSIs, the CCC, and the CCVO, and TalentED YYC for employers. The branding has recently been consolidated to use only TalentED YYC for all audiences moving forward. The project Secretariate is comprised of an Executive Director overseeing the operations of four main teams: the Process Enhancement Team (PE team), the Employer Engagement Team (EE team), and Marketing and Communications Team (MC team), and the Research and Evaluation Team (RE team).

Process Enhancement Team (PE team): The PE team's primary stakeholders are the post-secondary institutions (PSIs) participating in the project. The PE team works with the PSI staff to understand WIL at each institution which helps the EE team have conversations with employers about the options they have to engage with student talent. This understanding provides the PSIs with stronger internal knowledge and analysis to support with their WIL programming. The PE team supports community building through a Community of Practice including PSI staff at all seven participating institutions as well as representatives from the CCC and CCVO. Community building is facilitated through hosting workshops, facilitating sponsorship subcommittees, building a resource hub, and supporting technology implementations.

Employer Engagement Team (EE team): The EE team is responsible for connecting employers to the project and facilitating employers' use of the TalentED YYC portal to post WIL opportunities. The EE Team provides 1:1 service to employers to: scope student opportunities that can be posted to the portal; understand their needs and guide them towards using WIL; support their needs to undertake WIL; educate them about WIL options; and to make connections/referrals. The EE team develops resources to help employers understand the different WIL types and navigate options to fund student WIL opportunities. The team attends events around the region to meet employers and familiarize them with the ins and outs of WIL, including what WIL can offer their companies and organizations. They have also been partnering to host employer workshops to educate employers. With support from the Marketing and Communications team, they find the associations with which to partner, hold meetings with partner associations to discuss the details and set dates/times, ensure the technology requirements are met for events, and create the content and facilitate the workshops.

Marketing and Communications Team (MC team): The MC team supports the public-facing brand recognition of TalentED YYC to increase employer awareness of the project and the value it can bring to companies and organizations. The team supports the Secretariate's outreach and activities, such as event and workshop hosting, advertising, social media posts and blogs, monthly e-newsletters, website development, and SEO tracking.

Research and Evaluation Team (RE team): The RE team works directly with funders and the other Secretariate teams to provide the former monthly metrics about the project which respond to funders' key performance indicators (KPIs) and reporting requirements. The team also works with third-party researchers such as Stone-Olafson for market research and Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) for the ongoing evaluation of the project.

Executive Director (ED): The Executive Director heads the Secretariate, providing oversight and support to keep the project and its various elements on track and aligned. The ED also communicates with the project’s main stakeholders, partners, and especially funders to keep them up to date with the project and its progress. A key long-term task for the ED is to support and plan for the sustainability of TalentED YYC and the Calgary WIL Secretariate.

The 2023 Final Report

This report is part of a multi-year and multi-deliverable evaluation to analyze the Calgary WIL Pilot Project (hereby referred to as “the project” or “TalentED YYC” to reflect the recent full rebrand) by Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) on behalf of the Calgary WIL Secretariate. The Secretariate is required to generate evidence to ensure accountability and learning of the project. HESA provides evaluation design and method expertise to the Secretariate.

The focus of this evaluation is the Calgary WIL Secretariate and its role in facilitating partnerships among participating stakeholders. The primary goal of this HESA evaluation aims at generating evidence for internal quality improvement purposes by contributing to the following:

- Improving the theory of change as a project conceptual framework
- Establishing a monitoring system to manage data sources for measurements and narratives in identifying WIL trends and patterns
- Examining the WIL pilot model’s efficacy in meeting the needs of the local municipal stakeholders
- Developing lessons learned and best practices of the pilot project, including sustainability and scalability within Canada

HESA is responsible for developing an evaluation framework to guide this process throughout the project. This evaluation is both formative and summative in nature. HESA’s evaluation framework includes evaluation questions, data collection methods, analysis strategies, a data management plan, and deliverables.

This final 2023 report presents the project’s activities in 2023 and discusses them in relation to the project’s core goals. The report is structured in six sections, the first section being this introduction. The second section discusses the background of the project and the context in which it was conceived and implemented. Included in this section is a discussion of the project’s Theory of Change. The third section describes HESA’s evaluation methodology for the project, including data collection practices and sources, the limitations of the information presented in the report, and the main research questions HESA employed to gather its data. The fourth section offers a look at the project to date, including an overview of the activities undertaken by the project team in 2023, the key milestones in the project, and the feedback gathered by project stakeholders during HESA’s data collection. The fifth section builds on the feedback from

project stakeholders to discuss the initial assumptions about the project’s context, how these have contributed to challenges faced by the project team, and how the Secretariate has endeavoured to rectify or surmount these challenges. The sixth and final section discusses the lessons and implications of TalentED YYC’s activities to date in its wider context, highlighting examining how the project could be scaled or replicated in other regions and what factors may contribute to different outcomes for the project.

Limitations of the evaluation

This evaluation report should be read with two contextual aspects of the project in mind. One, the pilot project has been in operation for less than a year at the time of writing. Delays in the project’s start up have affected its pace and progress, along with other challenges which will be touched upon throughout the report. For these reasons, there are limitations to the data that could be collected at this time. This report thus presents a checkpoint in the larger timeline of the pilot project and should be read as a formative assessment rather than as a summative assessment. Future rounds of data collection will provide a modestly longitudinal perspective through which to assess the impact of the project.

Two, this project is the first of its kind in Canada to bring together as many as seven PSIs and to operate out of an organization that is not a PSI nor a unit of a provincial government. The reasoning for this structure is provided in the second section of this report. This is a relatively novel approach to increasing and scaling WIL in a region—hence why it is a “pilot” project. There are few prior initiatives in Canada with similar enough parameters from which lessons could have been learned and applied prior to the conception of this project (e.g., Future NB and VIWIL¹). These two features contribute to many of the challenges in the project. They do not contribute to such a degree that the only lesson to be learned is to not replicate these features. However, stakeholders who participated in HESA’s evaluation activities, as well as HESA’s WIL content expert, shared that issues and red flags in the project’s design were immediately evident to them. Several of the participants argued that a project attempting such a novel design would benefit from a higher degree of preliminary research from WIL experts and practitioners at the project proposition stage. Still, piloting a project with these parameters provides invaluable lessons that can contribute to a more refined and informed foundation from which future projects replicating these features can be conceived. Ideally, some of the lessons presented in this report, read alongside the stakeholder feedback, can inform the practices of TalentED YYC for the remainder of its run.

¹ Please see Deliverable 1, “Scan of WIL Types and Comparator System- Level WIL Initiatives,” for a detailed description of these initiatives.

2. Project Background and Description

Project need and opportunity

TalentED YYC was conceptualized in 2021 by the provosts of several post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in Calgary in the wake of the Government of Alberta's (GoA) *Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs Strategy*, which has as its second goal the mandate to offer WIL opportunities to all post-secondary students in the province by 2030. The strategy positions this goal as a way to bridge the perceived talent gap between the education offered to students by PSIs and the skills needed by employers. Ultimately, the mandate is in place to bolster and renew the Alberta economy after a decline in the oil and gas industry and economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This strategy was adopted alongside the GoA's implementation of performance-based funding for public PSIs, for which offering WIL is a required metric to meet to maintain current funding levels. If not met, funding will decrease. In 2021 as in today, PSIs in Calgary are varied in their approaches to WIL depending on institutional history, priorities, and resource capacity. Some institutions had well-established and comprehensive offerings which provided a useful basis upon which to build to meet the provincial WIL mandate, while others had little to no WIL programming and have scrambled to conceptualize what WIL can look like with their programming before moving forward with implementation.

As articulated by Dexter Lam,² one of the project's original proponents, the purpose of the TalentED YYC is to develop and demonstrate a viable regional approach to building and supporting community capacity to scale work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for post-secondary students. Key initial goals of the project included:

1. Fostering collaboration between post-secondary institutions (PSIs), employers and industries, community networks, and local and provincial governments.
2. Filling a perceived talent gap by developing a talent pipeline for post-secondary students to develop competencies and skills that will bring them success in the labour market.
3. Increasing the capacity—of PSIs, employers, etc.—to provide WIL by developing the tools, resources, and networks required to reduce barriers to engage in WIL.

The project's proponents identified a gray zone of responsibility and action in the work-integrated learning space in Calgary: post-secondary institutions, employers, and the provincial government all had a stake in WIL but none of them had the capacity or combined knowledge to implement a coordinated effort to increase the WIL opportunities in the city. While PSIs were building the capacity of their WIL teams, employer engagement remained a time-consuming task that was both lower on the PSIs priority list than other necessary activities (e.g., developing WIL programs and structures) and one

² Described during an initial meeting between HESA and CED on February 16, 2023.

that some PSI leaders did not consider their institutions best positioned to achieve at the rate needed to meet the provincial requirements.

TalentED YYC and its Secretariate were established out of Calgary Economic Development as an entity which could bridge the conversations between PSIs and employers and help create a scalable WIL ecosystem in Calgary. This ecosystem would respond to the *Alberta 2030* plan. While funding sources for the project were secured in early 2022, recruitment for the Secretariate and development of the project's portal began several months later. The project officially started in Spring 2023—only a few months after most of the Secretariate staff was hired—with the launch of the portal to post WIL opportunities across the seven participating PSIs. It is set to run until March 2025.

The project has a wide scope in terms of sectors, demographics, and occupations, as the only crucial factor is that the WIL opportunities are for post-secondary students. The project's portal features five of the six³ WIL types defined by the Government of Alberta. These are:

1. Cooperative education
2. Internship
3. Service Learning
4. Field Placement
5. Mandatory professional practicum/clinical placements⁴

Additionally, the Government of Alberta guidelines includes an “Other” WIL type, only described vaguely as a WIL experience with “WIL attributes that do not fall within the attributes defined [in the other categories].”⁵ In May 2023, the Secretariate accepted funding from the Business and Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) for what BHER calls “innovative WIL” or “iWIL,” conceptualized as events run by or with employers that attract students to prepare them for a standard WIL opportunity. Examples include hackathons, bootcamps, and other events requiring around 10 hours of student activity and that are shorter than standard WIL opportunities. These opportunities were assessed by the Secretariate as falling under the “Other” category and as potential precursors to formalized WIL within PSIs. BHER's funding also extends to what is being called “projects” (i.e., capstone projects, applied research projects) which are prevalent in many post-secondary programs and have also been assessed by the Secretariate as within the GoA's “Other” WIL type. Scoping and coordinating projects require more support from both the EE team and the PE team as they are more often supported within PSIs by faculty, not the WIL practitioners who are the primary contact points for the PE team.

³ “Directed Field Study” is the sixth GoA WIL type and is not on the portal.

⁴ Though featured on the portal, the Secretariate has not been actively prospecting for mandatory clinical placements, nor systematically gathering information from the PSIs on these because they tend to be highly regulated.

⁵ Alberta Advanced Education, Post-Secondary Programs Department. (2020). *Guidelines: Work integrated learning*

The Secretariate has also categorized some WIL opportunities under their own catch-all “work experience” type, which allows employers to forgo self-assessing their opportunity so that PSI staff with the necessary knowledge can do this assessment on their end.

The GoA WIL types closely follow most of the nine types defined by Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada), the leading national organization for WIL in Canada. Alberta does not have an association leading WIL in the province, unlike neighbouring British Columbia and Yukon, which have the Association of Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning (ACE-WIL). It is worth noting that ACE-WIL directly follows CEWIL’s nine definitions of WIL. In communications with the project’s Community of Practice, the GoA stated that their current focus is to track WIL and evaluate the programs for rigour and outcomes, but that they are open to feedback on the WIL types. The three WIL types from CEWIL that the government left out were deemed too difficult to track at this stage.

ACE-WIL, and the BC WIL Council working within it, provides an example of the needs that were not currently addressed in Alberta, and to which TalentED YYC responds in part. The association and the council take on the roles of coordinating interactions and knowledge exchanges between WIL experts, PSI staff working in WIL, employers, government branches, and post-secondary students.

Theory of Change

The TalentED YYC’s Theory of Change has been articulated in different ways, resting on the premise that WIL builds talent for the labour market and society (Figure 1). Much of this variation in the project’s ToC can be ascribed to differences in the unit of analysis: the project vs. the system.





Figure 1: How WIL builds talent

HOW WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING BUILDS TALENT



In some cases, the suite of CED resources and activities is the “project,” and the focus of the Theory of Change is on the extent to which those elements yield WIL-related outputs and outcomes. The linkages between outcomes and impact have been less well articulated as a result, and the assumptions underpinning the linkages between outputs and outcomes have been elided as well.⁶

TALENTED YYC PILOT PROJECT THEORY OF CHANGE

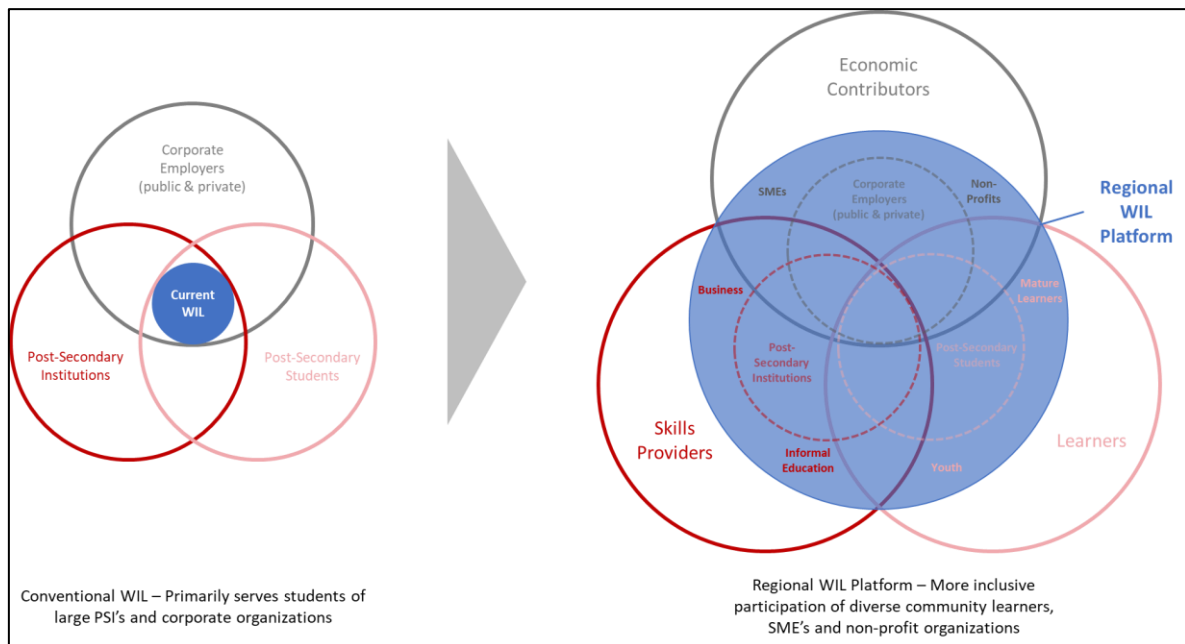
INPUT	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS		OUTCOMES	IMPACT
		KPIs	2023 TARGETS		
Funding for Talented YYC pilot project:    <small>With the support of</small>  	EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT Connect with and support employers to explore and create new WIL opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating new WIL opportunities PROCESS ENHANCEMENT Understanding WIL processes at PSIs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting PSIs on WIL to fill gaps and create opportunities • Developing tools and resources to support PSIs • Developing a community of practice for WIL MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a marketing strategy • Implementing the strategy by leading a marketing team RESEARCH AND EVALUATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing market research contracts and projects • Administering employer and student surveys for data collection • Reporting on monthly, quarterly, and annual project progress PORTAL DEVELOPMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and deploy a centralized digital portal 	Number of successfully placed WIL students.	300	Satisfaction with WIL Recruitment and onboarding process.	Increase capacity among employers in Calgary. Fostering collaboration through bringing stakeholders together in conversations. Developing and sharing resources. Increase capacity among Calgary's business communities. Increased number of employers interested in offering students placements. Learning and growth for WIL in Calgary.
		Number of employers offering WIL opportunities.	100	Diversify WIL types and opportunities.	
		Satisfaction with WIL recruitment and onboarding process (ease of use of the portal, templates).	Net Promoter Score	New SMEs offering WIL.	
		Number of WIL current state maps.	20%	Equitable access to WIL opportunities.	
		Number of WIL prototypes of tools and resources.		Quality of WIL Opportunities.	
		Engagement of the operational CoP.		New opportunities for students to participate in WIL.	
		Satisfaction rating increase of employers, students and PSIs. Support needed from research and evaluation manager.		Building awareness around the importance of student work experience in Calgary and the value of structuring placements as WIL.	
		Diversity of types of WIL opportunities, including innovative/emerging WIL.		Tools/templates developed.	
		Quality of WIL opportunities and experience (Alignment to student programs/ learning goals and employer's talent goals).	Stories and Testimonials	Centralized portal for employers to post WIL opportunities for 7 PSIs in Calgary.	
		Employer awareness marketing components of advertising, PR, content development, etc.			
Monthly report to key stakeholders.	9				
Knowledge mobilization and lessons learned.	2				
WIL opportunities posted through portal.	300				

Alternatively, one can widen one's view to encompass Talented YYC and the constellation of other relevant actors, resources, activities, and relationships that comprise the WIL ecosystem in the Calgary region. The latter case encourages a more holistic Theory of Change that situates the pilot project as a set of interventions that takes explicit account

⁶ Excerpt from the “Knowledge Mobilization Product” (2023-08-18 d4.pdf) produced in August 2023 following a Theory of Change development workshop hosted at CED.

of the known and postulated flows of resources, knowledge, power, and decision-making within and among the members of this ecosystem (e.g., funders, governments, PSIs, business associations, and students).

Figure 2: Conventional WIL (left) vs the vision of the Calgary Consortium for Work Integrated Learning as a regional platform (right) for the benefit of all of Calgary. In this depiction, Learners will include post-secondary students and learners outside the education system who are looking to re-skill or re-tool. Skill providers will include Calgary's seven post-secondary institutions and community-based skills development providers. Economic contributors will include public and private corporate employers, as well as non-profits and small/medium enterprises.



Early elements of such a ToC are presented above (Figure 2).⁷ The BHER funding for innovative WIL was accepted by the Secretariate in service to this more holistic visioning of TalentED YYC and its role in the Calgary WIL ecosystem. Innovative WIL is conceptualized as filling a space between employers, students, and PSIs which is not otherwise attended to by traditional WIL types.

The objectives and goals of the pilot project (Figure 3) once it was implemented align with the early elements of the ToC presented above.

⁷ These are drawn from a "Calgary Consortium for Work Integrated Learning Nov2021.docx" proposal submitted by the University of Calgary to a private donor.

Figure 3: Pilot project's goals

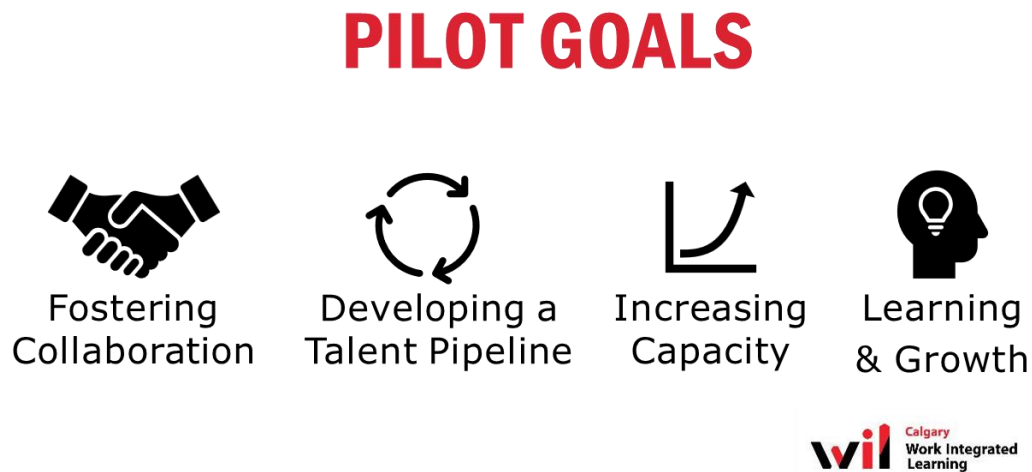
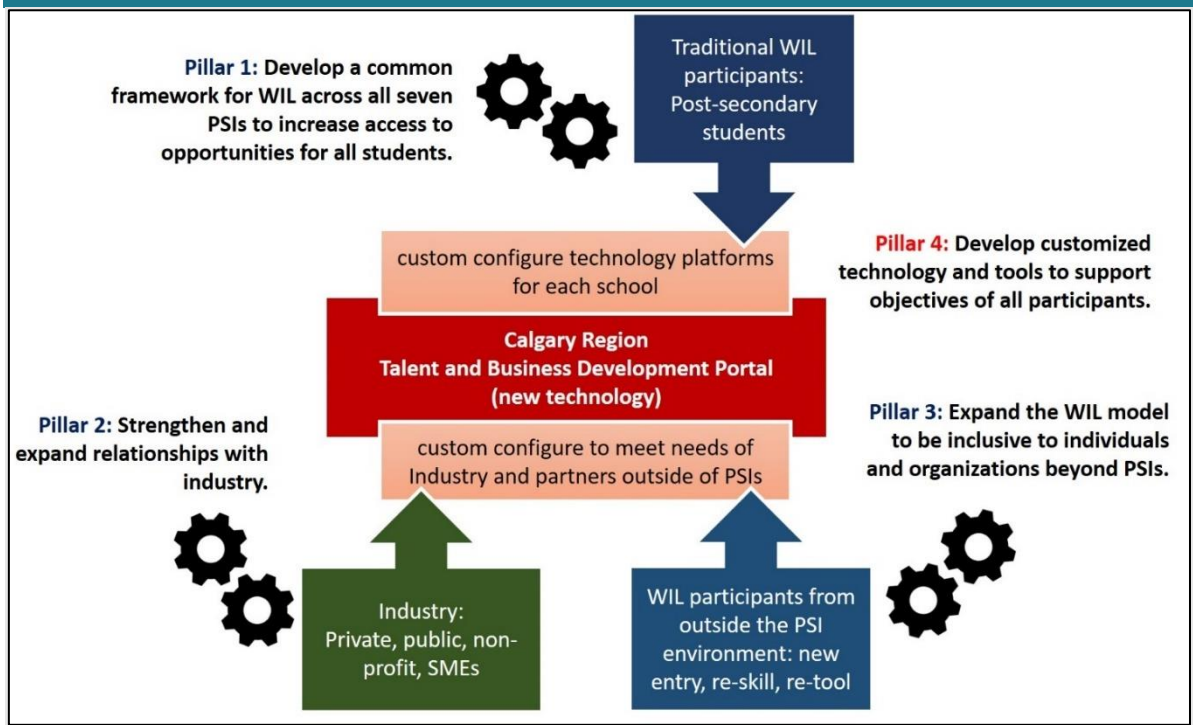


Figure 4: The interconnectedness of the pillars of focus of the Consortium.



Even in the more complex ToC elements above, the logic model of the program (Figure 4) has not been fully integrated within the depiction of the WIL ecosystem (Figure 2).

Since its launch, TalentED YYC has focused on implementation and drawing lessons from that experience; a comprehensive Theory of Change that graphically depicts the real-world

program in its broader context has not been developed. However, the Secretariate has been conscious of and actively grappling with the implications of working within a complex ecosystem.

What is the project testing?

Similarly, much of HESA's work with TalentED YYC and the PSIs has focused on providing insights that reflect this complexity, drawing from the pilot project and from WIL programs elsewhere. These broader questions, and the broader Theory of Change underpinning the program, are present in the set of questions that CED posed when commissioning the evaluation:

- Is this WIL pilot a good model to scale WIL accessibility/opportunities?
- Is this the right model for WIL to increase adoption within our region?
- What greater impact can be achieved if this model is scaled?
- Is the governance structure appropriate/efficient/equitable?
- How can information gathered through the model inform labour market intelligence?
- How well is this model serving the respective needs of the stakeholders involved, including small and medium enterprises, 7 PSIs in Calgary?

CED viewed these questions in part as inputs that would culminate in a sustainability plan for a broadly similar program that would transcend the timeframe – and potentially the geographic limits – of the pilot. Sustainability considerations would include:

- Where/who should funding for the Secretariate come from?
- Is the Secretariate necessary for this model to succeed?
- What does the governance structure need to be?
- What/who is responsible for the ownership of this model?
- What are the critical operation criteria? – space, political, infrastructure, etc., and for the host organization (e.g., size/scale?)

HESA's work to date has helped to bring to the foreground many of the critical assumptions that are implicit in the design of the pilot project and which must be taken into account in designing potential future WIL projects in the Calgary region and elsewhere.

These assumptions, which are further discussed below in section five, include:

- Assumptions around the **online portal's capabilities**, i.e., its compatibility with existing infrastructure, its functionality of use, and its data tracking abilities.
- Assumptions regarding the **role of PSIs and their staff**. These include: the assumption that the support of senior-most university officials would translate seamlessly into action; that seven PSIs, representing inherently unique ecosystems with varying governance models, infrastructures, program offerings,

strategic priorities, and financial and human resources, would rally around a standardized model of WIL support; that questions around implementation within an institution would be efficiently addressed by the administration of that institution; and that PSI staff would welcome external support and view it as a value-add rather than an imposition on their already stretched workload.

- Assumptions regarding the degree to which the **BHER-funded activities** of TalentED YYC would fit with PSIs' understanding of the project, and the extent to which administrators would view these activities as useful and welcome.
- Assumptions around **employers' understanding of WIL and of the portal's reach**. The project did not fully anticipate the difficulty of explaining WIL types, opportunities, and limitations – of programs and of the portal – to employers.

3. Evaluation methodology

This evaluation was conducted using data collected from: team meetings between HESA and the Secretariate; monthly project reports compiled by the Secretariate; the contents of previous deliverables submitted by HESA to the Secretariate; and interviews conducted by HESA with employers, PSI staff, and the Secretariate. HESA conducted 33 interviews with 38 total participants between October 20, 2023 and November 16, 2023. This included 19 employers, 6 Secretariate staff, 12 PSI staff, and one additional community partner. Interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes to one hour. This marks the first of three interview rounds planned for the evaluation of the project.

The following list includes the evaluation questions designed to help HESA evaluate the project. The first eight questions are the ones addressed through various interviews. The ninth question describes some of the areas to be covered by quantitative data. The tenth question, which is basically a summative question, will be addressed through a summary of various lines of data from questions one to nine, plus financial data from the CED and administrative data from the PSIs and the TalentED YYC portal when they become available.

1. What is the current status of the pilot project? What are the intended and unintended challenges?
2. In what ways does the pilot project establish and maintain partnerships with the stakeholders? What is working well and what is not?
3. What unique value does the pilot project bring to meet each of the partners' needs? What could TalentED YYC still address that would benefit this consortium approach?
4. What are the stakeholders' expectations of this pilot project going forward?
5. What have been the costs and benefits of the WIL pilot project? In what way has the project generated benefits for employers?
6. In what ways does TalentED YYC support the quantity of WIL positions and the quality of the experience? How would participating institutions and employers be impacted with respect to WIL if the pilot project shut down?
7. What are the friction points of this pilot project?
8. How has this pilot project demonstrated the feasibility of a WIL regional approach?
9. What do we know about how Calgary WIL experiences – both in terms of students served and jobs offered/filled – differ from other WIL experiences?
10. What are the true costs and benefits of TalentED YYC?

The following table describes the overall design of this evaluation protocol.

Table 1. Evaluation Design: Overview

Questions	Sub-questions	Informants	Data sources
1. What is the current status of each of Calgary WIL's partnerships?	What are the intended and unintended challenges?	PSIs, Employers, and the Secretariate	Interviews
2. In what ways does Calgary WIL establish and maintain partnerships with the stakeholders?	What is working well and what is not?	PSIs, Employers Partners, and the Secretariate	Interviews
3. What unique value does the WIL Pilot project bring to meet each of the partners' needs?	What could Calgary WIL still address that would benefit this consortium approach?	PSIs, Employers, Partners, and the Secretariate	Interviews
4. What are the stakeholders' expectations of this Pilot project going forward?		PSIs, Employers, and Partners	Interviews
5. In what ways has the project generated economic and social benefits for employers?		Employers	Interviews
6. In what ways does this Pilot project support the quality/quantity of the WIL experience?		PSIs, Employers, and Partners	Interviews, Data from CED and PSIs
7. What are the friction points of this Pilot project?		PSIs, Employers	Interviews
8. How has this Pilot project demonstrated a WIL regional approach?		PSIs, Employers, Partners, and the Secretariate	Interviews
9. What do we know about how TalentED YYC WIL experiences—both in terms of students served and jobs offered/filled—differ from other WIL experiences?	Does the project do better or worse than other WIL recruitment methods at serving equity-deserving groups?	Data obtained from institutions through MOUs, and through TalentED YYC portal itself	Administrative data
10. What are the true costs and benefits of TalentED YYC?		Summary of various lines of data from Q 1-9, plus financial data from the Secretariate	Interviews and Administrative data

4. Project to date: April 2023 to December 2023

The portal

At the onset of this project, the portal was considered the project's main value add. However, limitations to the portal became evident early on. The portal was envisioned as a centralized source for WIL opportunities from employers to PSIs, as well as for data regarding the uptake of these opportunities by students.

For employers, the portal was meant to be a user-friendly platform through which they could provide the details of a WIL opportunity and it would be sent to each PSI in Calgary, thus potentially reaching every student with an interest in WIL at these institutions.

For the PSIs, the portal was meant to either seamlessly integrate into their existing technological WIL infrastructure (if any existed) or work well beside the existing technological WIL infrastructure without much additional labour or effort from staff. If successful, over time the portal would potentially replace some of the existing technological infrastructure to streamline WIL for the PSIs.

For the Secretariate, the portal would be intuitive to use by the employers and the PSI staff, thus only requiring minor support from the Secretariate to these stakeholders during the implementation stage. The portal would also track how many WIL opportunities were posted and by which kinds of businesses, which WIL opportunities were filled by a student who found the posting through the portal, and information about the students who applied for the opportunities. This last data piece would include information about the student's program and any socio-demographic information—like gender, race, Indigenous status, ability/disability, and more—that was voluntarily provided by the student either to their PSI or in their application through the portal. The project plan was devised around these capabilities.

In practice, the portal did not meet these expectations, though some technological workarounds have since mitigated some of these issues. For instance, employers needed more support to post opportunities than anticipated, in part because the portal required them to categorize their opportunities along WIL types and employers did not have the depth of knowledge about WIL that was needed to do so. Thus, the platform was not user-friendly for employers as expected. The technological work around was the addition of the "work experience" WIL type so that the task of categorization could be given to the PSIs instead. On the PSI end, the portal was not a seamless addition to their existing WIL infrastructure. The degrees to which the portal has not functioned smoothly for PSIs vary per institution, and examples will be discussed in the next section on assumptions. Based on what participants shared in interviews, several PSI staff anticipated a less-than-seamless integration because they knew the intricacies or gaps in their WIL infrastructures that could cause compatibility issues. Some also had an idea of how this varied amongst the partnered PSIs, and therefore always had an element of skepticism mixed into their hope that the portal could work so well for all seven PSIs.

The ways in which the portal's functionality fell below expectations for employers and PSI staff greatly affected the Secretariate's capacity for work at the onset of the project launch, and the effects of this have carried onward. The Secretariate was prepared to provide support to these stakeholders from the onset, knowing that any technology takes some time to adjust and learn. However, the extent to which support was needed could not have been anticipated until the portal's true functionality came to light, and the Secretariate found itself with far more work than they had been set up to do. Additionally, the portal's functionality for the Secretariate fell short, as it could not track any of the data it was meant to, and which needed to be tracked for reporting to funders. The Secretariate thus found itself in a position of needing to provide additional support to its two main stakeholder groups as well as come up with work arounds for the shortcomings of the portal in terms of data tracking.

The Secretariate

When the limitations of the portal became apparent, the Secretariate duly pivoted its focus to maintain its value to its partners while still attending to the issues of the portal. During this first period of operations, the Secretariate worked to identify and meet the needs of its partners, which took some trial and error as they discovered how needs differed. For instance, the needs varied between small and large PSI partners, or PSIs with established WIL programs versus those only beginning to develop these opportunities. The PE team has worked with PSIs to provide process maps for their WIL programs. Some institutions have different WIL programs operating without much connection to each other, so it was the main PSI staff contacts who determined which programs would most benefit from participating in the mapping workshops.

The Community of Practice (CoP) meetings led by the PE team faced some challenges at the beginning as there was a lot of housekeeping to be done, including assessing the differences between PSI WIL capacities and their individual needs. Now that these differences have been assessed, the meetings have grown to include three subcommittees—Resource development; Promotion, marketing, education of WIL; and Understanding of WIL—comprised of PSI staff and community partners, like CCVO. Furthermore, a quarterly PSI workshop series is being run called *Conversations on Calgary WIL*.

Some employers were seasoned WIL providers and could adapt to the portal quickly once some functionality issues were fixed, thus needing little else from the EE team. This gave the EE team the opportunity to focus more attention on employers—typically from SMEs and start-ups—that had little to no experience hiring students and thus benefitted from more hands-on attention and support. Start-ups have needed a lot of support from the EE team, as these employers are often very new to hiring and have limited to no financial capacity for compensation. The EE team has successfully taken on the task of providing employers across the board with strong leads to funding opportunities as well as guidance through the funding applications.

The MC team is responsible for the TalentED YYC branding, which was launched in April as an employer-facing brand parallel to the Calgary WIL Pilot Project for PSIs. TalentED

YYC has recently become the central brand, replacing the Calgary WIL Pilot Project. When the MC team started their work at the Secretariate, it was clear to them that “WIL” and “work-integrated learning” were not familiar terms to most employers, and they would risk being misunderstood and lacking traction in marketing campaigns. TalentED YYC encapsulates all elements of the project without the jargon of WIL: emerging talent coming from post-secondary education institutions in Calgary. Recently, the MC team has noted that some people perceive TalentED YYC to be a recruiting agency at first glance, so the communications accompanying the brand name are being reassessed for further clarity.

In May 2023, the Secretariate accepted funding from the Business and Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) for what BHER calls “innovative WIL” or “iWIL,” conceptualized as events run by or with employers that attract students to prepare them for a standard WIL opportunity. Examples include hackathons, bootcamps, and other events requiring around 10 hours of student activity and that are shorter than standard WIL opportunities. There is some overlap between stakeholders for iWIL and the original project design, but events and outreach for iWIL activities are largely separate from the rest of the project activities as they fulfill a different role in the Calgary WIL ecosystem than does traditional WIL types.⁸ The BHER funding also supports “projects” (i.e., capstone projects, applied research projects), which are not expressly recognized in the GoA’s WIL types but which are in line with CEWIL’s “Capstone and Applied Research Projects” category. These BHER-funded opportunities are organized between the EE team, the PE team, and the MC team.

Events and activities

From April 2023 to December 2023, the Secretariate has hosted or co-hosted 7 events and 2 workshops. They have attended over 30 events, either as opportunities for employer engagement or for networking and professional development in service to the project. The Process Enhancement Team has completed 23 process maps for PSIs and held three “Conversations on Calgary WIL” workshop sessions, which provide a space for feedback and discussion between the PSI WIL practitioners and the PE team, as well as a space to celebrate achievements and milestones of the PSI partners. In terms of the portal, 17 features have been added since its launch in Spring 2023 and 97 of the 171 issues flagged by users have been fixed. Monthly highlights are as follows:

April: The Secretariate launched the monthly report for stakeholders and their employer-facing brand TalentED YYC.

May: The Secretariate launched the TalentED YYC platform and onboarded student interns for the summer. The BHER funding for iWIL and projects was announced.

June: A market research survey was run by Stone-Olafson to distribute among Calgary businesses and volunteer organizations, and HESA conducted a Theory of Change workshop with the Secretariate. The PE team held its first *Conversations on Calgary WIL* session titled “Pain Points and Remedies,” during which the participating PSI WIL

⁸ In this report, activities that relate to iWIL will be flagged as such to distinguish between them and the activities related to standard WIL.

practitioners validated the top pain points they were facing in their work and developed action plans to address them. Subcommittees were also formed at this time so that the PSIs could have continued input in the project direction and work.

July: The MC team collaborated in a two-day iWIL event called the “Net Zero Student Boot Camp.” The PE team connected with Alberta University of the Arts for the first time.

August: The EE team created a funding decision tree as an employer resource and the PE team’s CoP subcommittees started in full this month. The PE team also held their second *Conversations* session titled “Building Together,” in which they presented the Wise Practice Forms and other resources/tools they developed following the first workshop. PSIs were invited to give feedback on these resources and provided with a space to discuss the WIL topics most pressing to them, furtherer building the WIL community and support network through relationship-building amongst PSIs.

September: The PE team built a resources catalogue on EDIA resources for employers and WIL case studies, and Stone-Olafson followed up on its market research survey with focus group sessions.

October: The first of a three-part employer workshop series was hosted called “Recruiting and Utilizing Student Talent in Your Organization.” The PE team is onboarding the non-Orbis schools onto the platform, added provincial and national funding opportunities for WIL on the TalentED YYC website, and hosted representatives from the Government of Alberta at a Community of Practice meeting.

November: The PE team held its third and last *Conversations* session for 2023 titled “A Community-led Journey,” in which PSIs were empowered to have ownership of the workshops and the opportunities they provide. The workshop was facilitated by PSIs and had a guest from CEWIL and started a discussion about growing an Alberta WIL group comparable in part to ACE-WIL in British Columbia.

December: The Secretariate collaborated with the Calgary Chamber of Commerce to host a holiday mixer, inviting employers and representatives who support student talent to network and celebrate the 2023 achievements in the WIL space in Calgary.

The Secretariate are in various stages of planning events, workshops, and conference presentations for 2024. The *Conversations on Calgary WIL* workshops will resume in 2024, with the fourth in the series planned for February 12th. A goal for 2024 is to set up an employer advisory group through the EE team to function similarly but separately to the PE team’s CoP. They are also determining resources to build for employers and PSIs in the new year.

Milestones

There are two milestones essential to the project’s ultimate aims which are underway at the time of writing.

One: The adoption and implementation of the Orbis platform by the three PSIs that joined the project without it. The relevant staff at all three PSIs have met with the Orbis team to provide the information the latter needs to build their personalized platforms. These platforms are now available to the PSIs for testing in a sandbox (i.e., a highly controlled environment in which select users of the technology can test its features and provide feedback to the technology's developers to improve the function of the product). The current goal for these PSIs is to test the platform for one course in one program in time to be used for the Spring term. They will gather further insights about the functions from this real-world test, refine as needed, and then have the potential to adapt the platform to more programs for the following term. Successful implementation of this platform across all seven partnered PSIs will be a major project milestone, as the platform is a key value add of the project to those institutions which did not previously have it.

Two: Signing the Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) between the Secretariate and all seven partnered PSIs. These MoUs set parameters for the activities that will be undertaken between the two parties (the Secretariate and each PSI) and reflects an agreement on what each party will provide the other, and to what end. Drafting and signing the MoUs have taken longer than anticipated, with a few new points of disagreement arising throughout the process. The MoU was initially approached in the singular to apply to the Secretariate and all the PSIs. However, early into the Secretariate's operations, the different needs and circumstances of PSIs became wholly apparent and it was decided to pursue separate MoUs with each PSI to better represent the reciprocal elements of each relationship.

An anticipated sticking point for the negotiation of the MoUs was the request to the PSIs to share data on their students who participate in WIL opportunities. This data would allow the Secretariate to report to its funders how many students secured WIL positions made available through the TalentED YYC portal. In cross-reference with the details in the WIL postings (wage/salary, term length, etc.) already available to the Secretariate through the TalentED YYC portal, these numbers would also be used in speculative calculations of the project's overall economic impact. It was also assumed that the data shared from PSIs would have voluntarily-provided socio-demographic information for students, enabling the Secretariate to gather information on the makeup of the students who secured WIL opportunities, in turn allowing HESA to assess access to WIL for equity-deserving groups. Since MoUs have not yet been secured, these metrics cannot yet be fully measured.

Interestingly, the PSIs have not pushed back on the request to share this data. While PSIs do not seem opposed to this request, they do recognize that the Secretariate's interest in the data can be used as leverage to negotiate for reciprocal terms. At least one institution is requesting financial compensation in exchange for the terms of the MoU, but a direct funds transfer to any institution is not possible within the Secretariate's funding contracts. The Secretariate is finding other ways to address the concerns of the PSIs so that MoUs can be finalized. The anticipated timeline for finalization has kept moving, so it is unclear when they will finally be signed. Until then, data tracking for the project will remain a somewhat ad hoc endeavour.

Metrics

WIL opportunities and employer engagement

The metrics that can be presented are those directly tracked by the Secretariate. Throughout 2023, 48 unique employers have posted WIL positions on the TalentED YYC platform, 11 of which are repeat posters. Between these employers, 118 WIL opportunities have been posted, representing 253 positions of which 185 targeted students who identify with an equity-deserving group,⁹ and 66 students have been confirmed as placed through the portal. There are some reasons for the discrepancy between these last two numbers.

1. The portal does not track which students would find an opportunity through the portal rather than elsewhere, so the total number of students is likely more than 66, but this cannot be verified.
2. The differences between the number of postings and the number of placements can in part be explained by some known issues with getting applicants for all postings, resulting in the postings having to be reoriented or referred to alternate WIL types.
3. It has been a challenge to get the placement data from employers, who may not know how the student they hired found the opportunity or even if they are in a WIL program.
4. The success of postings depends in part on their timing throughout the year and how it lines up with PSIs timing for securing WIL opportunities, but this cannot always or easily be coordinated. As such, some postings may be posted too far in the future or too late to generate applications.

The EE team has flagged these issues with data tracking and will work on improving them in 2024. The EE team is also aiming to gather data points about the number of opportunities and positions posted under each of the portal's WIL types. Once gathered, they can compare these to the PE team's data capturing the frequency of WIL programs amongst WIL types. The resulting analysis from this data collation can steer the EE team's prospecting of new employers to align with the needs of the PSIs.

Finally, in terms of iWIL, 259 opportunities have been registered, with 203 completed, and 81 employers have been engaged in iWIL experiences. Participants of iWIL activities are also asked to complete a survey before and after their experience so that the Secretariate can gather feedback and evaluate the effectiveness of the events in meeting iWIL objectives. To date, 174 pre-surveys and 133 post-surveys have been completed.

⁹ Equity-deserving groups are identified in the federal Employment Equity Act as Federally Designated Groups (FDGs) and include women, Indigenous peoples, visible/racialized minority persons, and persons with disabilities, as well as LGBTQ2S+ persons.

Process enhancement team activities

In June 2023, the PE team launched its PSI workshop series. Their first workshop had 21 attendees and grew by 33% to 28 attendees in each the August and November workshops. The upcoming February 2024 workshop's registration numbers already reflect a 11% increase in interest, with 31 participants registered.¹⁰ Workshops have been attended by at least six of the seven partnered PSIs, with the third workshop representing all seven. For the first and third workshop, 100% of participants indicated that the workshop objectives had been met, and 77% stated this for the second workshop.

Feedback from stakeholders

This section discusses the feedback received by key stakeholders during the first round of interviews conducted in November 2023. HESA interviewed 38 people in total for this round, including 19 employers, 6 Secretariate staff, 12 PSI staff, and one additional community partner. The feedback is grouped by stakeholder (employers, PSI staff, and Secretariate) and then discussed by theme.¹¹

Employers

Interviews with employers provided several insights into the effectiveness of the TalentED YYC program to date, but these insights need to first be contextualized within the sample. As stated above, 19 employers were interviewed in total, three of which had not yet posted a WIL opportunity in the portal. Since most of the employers posted their WIL opportunity elsewhere as well as the portal, it is not possible to know whether those hired for these roles found the opportunities because of the portal. Therefore, any comments shared about the quality of work of the students these employers hired cannot necessarily be attributed to the effectiveness of the project.

During interviews, employers rarely referred to their WIL opportunity by its type (e.g., co-op, internship, project, etc.), nor were they asked to do so because the complexity of WIL types is a well-known point of confusion for employers. For instance, the employer survey conducted by Stone-Olafson for this project determined that employer familiarity with WIL is "passive at best," with less than a quarter of employers assessing themselves as "very familiar" with WIL.¹² With this understanding, HESA asked employers a few questions about the nature of the WIL position(s) (e.g., hours per week, length of position, pay, type of work engaged in) rather than the WIL type of their position(s). The HESA team's WIL expert determined through these context pieces and the sum of the conversations that most employers interviewed were likely interested in hiring a student for what would be considered a co-op position. HESA cannot cross-check this interpretation with the EE team's data on WIL placement types without revealing the employers who participated in

¹⁰ Registration is still open at the time of writing, so these numbers could increase or decrease by the time the workshop is held.

¹¹ Please note that insufficient participation from the Calgary Chamber of Commerce and the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations resulted in a singular data point which cannot be anonymized or aggregated. As such, HESA is not directly attributing feedback to these organizations.

¹² Stone-Olafson Survey Results Report July 2023: *Work Integrated Learning, Phase 1: Quantitative Outcomes*.

the interviews. Due to research ethics standards, this is not an option. Still, given HESA's WIL content expert's assessment, it is likely that most of the employers interviewed did offer co-op placements, or perhaps "work experience" positions. The feedback should thus not be taken as reflective of employer experiences across WIL types. Future rounds of evaluation may have the data to make such assessments.

The feedback from employers is here presented following key themes. These findings only reflect the input from employers HESA interviewed, unless otherwise stated. HESA recognizes that the relatively small number of employers interviewed cannot result in generalizable interpretations of employer perceptions about WIL.

Why hire students?

HESA interviewers asked employers what they saw as the value of hiring students in experiential learning positions. The top three answers were to 1) Provide students with opportunities, 2) Feed the talent pipeline, and 3) Make use of cost-effective labour.

Employers shared that they were interested in providing students with opportunities to learn and build their skills, and to apply their education. In many cases, employers stated that hiring students was reflective of their company or organization's values of supporting the next generation of workers in their education and their hands-on skill development. Providing paid opportunities for students was perceived as one way to go about this. Many employers further discussed the kind of work they assign to students as tasks that have an impact and that utilize the student's knowledge to further develop their skill sets. Some employers discussed student opportunities as going both ways, stating that taking on students provided their employees with opportunities to mentor young talent. Commonly heard throughout interviews was the belief that students bring fresh perspectives and are eager to have an impact in what they do, further suggesting that opportunities for students are sometimes synonymous with opportunities for employers to gain from student input.

Another top reason employers were interested in hiring students is to set up a talent pipeline by showing students what their company or organization does, and the kind of work students could do there once they graduate. For larger employers with a history of hiring students, the talent pipeline is made more attractive for students by providing them with tuition bonuses and periodic raises during their co-op placement. These financial incentives join professional development experiences as key attractions for students. For small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), employers saw value in students working in a company without the siloes expected at larger organizations. In SMEs, students could take on a variety of tasks, allowing them to learn about the different aspects that lead to running and operating a business. For small start-ups, the talent pipeline is approached from more of a value-based perspective, with the intent of showing students how passion can be mobilized through a business endeavour and of cultivating their buy-in for the start-up style of work (e.g., the delayed financial gratification).

Lastly, Students were largely considered as cost-effective labour for many employers. This was because the students were working part-time instead of full-time (i.e., no sick days or extended health benefit costs), were paid entry-level wages since they had less

professional experience, or the cost of wages was offset by external funding for the employer. For instance, some SME employers' administrative needs do not require a full-time position, but the administrative tasks splintered between the employees can lead to overwork and overtime pay. Hiring a part-time student to take on that work is thus not only more cost-effective than hiring a full-time professional, but it is also cost-efficient in that it releases their full-time staff from the administrative labour that takes up their days. For some small employers, there were odd jobs or roles (e.g., videographer for a marketing campaign) that would not warrant a full time or permanent role but are necessary for the employer's activities. In this case, students are a well-placed demographic from which to recruit as they are seen as more likely to want a part-time and temporary position. Particularly for start-ups, who may not have the ability to pay professional rates for these temporary roles, hiring a student meant lower wage expectations as well as potential access to funding sources that would either fully pay or match employer wages. While employers acknowledge that training students takes up staff time and thus does carry a cost, in some companies hiring a student is the difference between that work being done and that work not being done at all. For these employers, student labour was invaluable.

These reasons that employers shared for hiring students in WIL opportunities demonstrate that there is a mix of values at play, with employers considering the long-term benefits of student labour for their own company alongside the short-term benefits. The market research survey to employers conducted by Stone-Olafson for this project had similar findings.

The Employer Engagement Team

Employers certainly appreciated the ease of the portal to post across Calgary PSIs, some even hoping for an expansion of this reach to Edmonton or all of Canada. However, when asked about the ways in which their company has most benefitted from working with TalentED YYC, the overwhelming number of answers referred to interactions with the Employer Engagement Team. Employers especially appreciated the EE team's knowledge about funding sources, and several employers attributed their ability to hire a student to the EE team putting them in touch with a funder. Employers also benefited from feedback and advice on how to reframe their job postings to best speak to students and properly present their opportunity so that students understood to what they were applying. A few employers also mentioned the usefulness of TalentED YYC events, which gave them networking and learning opportunities. Overall, the EE team was characterized as friendly, very responsive, and quick with collaborative suggestions to meet the company's needs. Employers appreciated that the EE team supported their company's development, especially by checking in on their needs and connecting them to other professionals or networking opportunities. Employers were glad to have a connection to students, to PSIs, and to CED through the EE team.

Posting and the TalentED YYC portal

Most of the employers interviewed found out about TalentED YYC through a CED staff member or by attending a CED event. Most employers who had previously hired students for WIL opportunities responded that they decided to use TalentED YYC this time because

of its ease of use to reach all the Calgary PSIs. They stated that it was much easier and less time consuming to post the opportunities by using TalentED YYC and commended the support from the EE team to do so. Overall, employers did not notice a difference in the quality or quantity of their applicant pool. A few employers said that if it weren't for TalentED YYC, they likely would not have tried to hire anyone or they would have only posted at one university, like the University of Calgary. The average number of WIL postings employers made through TalentED YYC was two. No employer interviewed specified hiring students for project-based work, service learning, or any type of WIL other than co-op. As discussed at the top of this section, employer understandings of WIL type were not evaluated during these interviews and thus HESA cannot state with certainty whether this sample of employers is representative of the various WIL types known to have been offered in the portal. HESA's WIL content expert has interpreted the interview data and determined that co-op positions are most likely over-represented in the employer interview sample.

The students' roles

The most common field for which employers posted WIL opportunities was in marketing or public outreach positions. Also featured was engineering, business, research and program design, and administration. Around 40% of postings were for full-time positions, whereas the rest of the postings were for six to thirty hours a week. Placement lengths ranged from seven weeks to 16 months, with four months being the median length. Pay ranged from \$16/hour to \$38/hour, depending on skill and sector. Training for students typically took the equivalent of a workday, peppered throughout the first weeks of employment, but could last weeks or entail continuous training for positions that had longer lengths and deeper skill needs. Only some employers were in a position where they would consider hiring someone full-time in a role they currently had posted for students; of those, most did say they would absolutely hire a student back after they graduated. For some larger employers, WIL is integrated into their employment recruitment plan.

Applicant pool

Student applications are sent to employer emails or submitted through the employer website, so they have no way to know whether a student saw the WIL posting through TalentED YYC or another advertising mechanism. Most employers interviewed did post their WIL positions elsewhere as well, most commonly on their own company website or on LinkedIn. While it therefore is not possible to determine how many students were hired because an employer listed their WIL opportunity with TalentED YYC, it can be shared that at least two employers who only posted their opportunity in this portal ended up hiring for the role from outside of it. For one employer, the interest in their posting was overwhelming and they did not have the human resource capacities to filter through resumes. They hired someone referred to them by a colleague. This result should be well-noted given the project's mission to provide higher quality *and quantity* of WIL opportunities and of applicants to those opportunities. For another employer, few applications came in after posting through TalentED YYC, so the employer re-posted elsewhere.

It is also worth noting that more than one employer interviewed ended up hiring a permanent full-time employee at a salaried rate, indicating that their needs may never have been well-suited to a student. It cannot be said how the Employer Engagement Team discussed WIL to the employer or why such a posting would have been accepted. PSI staff also noticed many opportunities coming through that were full-time permanent positions, not WIL opportunities.

Opportunities for improvement

When asked what employers liked least about their experience with TalentED YYC, most of the responses referred to user design of the portal or confusion about WIL. Of the issues with the portal that were mentioned, most had since been fixed. One outstanding issue was that employers could not see how many students viewed their postings nor receive confirmation of which PSI job boards the posting was displayed on. Aside from the portal, some employers shared their confusion about the purpose of WIL and who could get hired. This confusion is echoed by some employers' reception of the applicant pool. Employers also wished to know more about grants and how to apply for them. When asked what TalentED YYC would change in the next six months to be more useful to their company, the top three answers were: 1) Grow and connect outside Calgary, particularly Edmonton (and the University of Alberta), 2) Deepen connections in the community so that TalentED YYC reaches more people, and 3) Offer a mechanism by which to filter resumes to help employers with low capacity to review large applicant pools. Additional suggestions were to hear about best practices in WIL to implement at their company, to increase promotion to students directly or through the PSIs, to offer guides to applying for funding, and offer resources specific to start-ups. The Secretariate are already underway with some of these suggestions, with plans for more in 2024.

Post-secondary institution staff

At least one staff member from each of TalentED YYC's partnered PSIs was interviewed, either individually or in pairs from the same institution. The PSIs were at different stages of engagement with the Secretariate. For instance, AUArts had only begun working with the PE team in July, months later than other PSIs. Each PSI was also in a different place internally regarding WIL, with some having decades-long programs and relationships with employers and others only in the planning stages of offering WIL throughout their institution. This leads to the most salient lesson learned from PSI partners in the project so far: to not underestimate the variance between PSIs in the same city or region, in terms of their general structures and operations, their specific workings related to WIL, and the value they would see in the different parts of the project. This point will be further addressed in the sections following this one.

The feedback from PSI staff is here presented following key themes, recognizing that the variance between PSI needs, sizes, and WIL capacity cannot result in generalizable interpretations of the pilot project's ability to fulfill PSI partner needs.

The Process Enhancement Team

A resounding piece of feedback from across the PSI partners was that the PE team have demonstrated an eagerness to adapt their activities to the needs of the PSI staff while maintaining project parameters. The PE team were most often described as responsive and helpful. PSI staff largely appreciated the PE team's consistent communication about the project, though some admitted to only occasionally reading the emails or reports and others said they would prefer reduced communication targeted to their PSI. Some PSI staff do not believe there was sufficient consultation with WIL practitioners at PSIs prior to the project's development in 2021. This was long before the PE team was assembled and entirely out of their control, but the PSI staff nonetheless maintained that communication and adaptation by the PE team at this stage would not make up for this initial issue.

This point relates to a larger issue of trust and relationship-building between the PSI staff and the PE team. An illustrative example of the wariness of one PSI staff was a concern they shared that the PE team would poach their institution's WIL staff. They were thus reticent to connect the PE team to other PSI staff working in WIL. There was no evidence that this concern was based on any actions of the PE team, but it demonstrates the degree to which this work requires relationship-building, and the importance of initial impressions, both of which can be outside of the control of the PE team. More on this point will be discussed in the next section on challenges.

The activities of the PE team have been received differently by each PSI. For instance, most of the PSI staff from the institutions with less established WIL infrastructure were very appreciative of the process mapping workshops at the start of the project. Some of the staff from these institutions still felt that the workshops were better suited to institutions further ahead in WIL programming than they were. Some of the staff from institutions with highly developed WIL infrastructure also felt the workshops had little value at their level because their structures were so complex as to require many hours of staff time to relay this information to the PE team. The PSI staff at these institutions found value in the output of the process mapping workshops but gaged it as less valuable than the staff time it would take to participate.

The PE team's avenues for supporting the PSIs were not always first evident to PSI staff. Overall, the PSI staff members interviewed shared a lack of initial clarity about the value of the PE team's work. Interviews suggest that the PSI staff's initial buy-in to the project and willingness (and capacity) to discuss their WIL programs openly could affect how much the PE team could prove its value. For instance, a staff member at an institution in the planning stages of expanding WIL programming shared that they had not initially expected the PE team to be of much help at this stage. However, through extended discussion with the staff member, the PE team identified a high-value way that it could support one of their WIL programs by working with the EE team. The staff member shared their gratitude for the PE team's initiative and support.

The portal

The portal was seen as redundant to those PSIs that already had Orbis. This was compounded by the fact that the TalentED YYC portal was not immediately compatible with the personalized PSI portals, so issues abounded. Overall, PSI staff were confused about the messaging about the portal and the project. At the start, the portal was relayed as the main value of the project. Once the issues with the portal became known, the PE team pivoted, but the false promises of the portal did not garner trust from the PSI partners. The PSIs that did not have Orbis at the project's onset have still not yet implemented it, however they are in the testing stages of their first portal designs.

Process mapping

The initial work of the PE team involved mapping the processes of WIL offices or programs that offer WIL. To do so, the PE team required considerable time spent with each PSI's WIL team. The process maps were positioned as a value add to the PSIs. They were received this way from around half of the PSIs, particularly those that were in early stages of building or expanding their institutional WIL strategies, though some still felt that the time it took reduced the overall value of the activity. For a few PSIs that already have processes and process improvement projects underway, the activity was seen as either a duplication of work or an inefficient method since it required "teaching" the PSIs WIL program structures to the PE team. For these PSI staff, the perceived benefit did not necessarily justify the staff hours. Some institutions were wary of the activity as the PE team was requesting proprietary information about the institution's processes without taking the time to build trust or a mutual understanding of the project's benefit. One PSI staff did not appreciate the framing of the process maps as a service provided *by* the PE team, viewing it instead as a service their PSI was providing *for* the PE team so that the latter could fulfill its project goals.

Workshops, events, and the Community of Practice

PSI staff were generally appreciative of the opportunities to network with other WIL practitioners in Calgary PSIs, whether at Community of Practice meetings or at workshops and events hosted by the Secretariate. Small PSIs, and those with staff somewhat newer to the WIL space in Calgary, were especially excited about these opportunities and considered networking a core value of the project. At the same time, some PSI staff found that the events, process mapping workshops, and CoP sub-committees ate up more time than they had to give. Interviews were being conducted while the PE team's latest *Conversations on Calgary WIL* sessions were underway, so HESA was not able to gather systematic reflections on the relevance of these from participants. However, a few interview participants did share that they enjoyed the sessions, with one saying that the topics of the sessions demonstrated that the PE team was really listening to what the PSI staff were asking for. Additionally, as presented in the previous section on *Metrics*, the PE team has captured feedback from session attendees that has been overwhelmingly positive.

Opportunities for improvement

Throughout interviews, PSI staff commented about their perceived scope creep of the project, with iWIL the most frequent example given. When asked what TalentED YYC would change in the next six months to be more useful to their institution, the top four answers were: 1) Building relationships with employers and their overall demand for WIL students, 2) Finalizing the MoUs with PSIs, 3) Assisting the PSIs with building resources and education tools for students (e.g., describing the benefits of WIL, informing the students of their rights as employees, etc.) and for faculty (e.g., also describing the benefits of WIL, outlining how WIL can be integrated in to course objectives, etc.), and 4), Implementing the Orbis portals and plan for sustainability. In essence, PSI staff across the board expressed wanting the project to stick it its scope and to accomplish the activities which it originally set out to do.

5. Discussion of assumptions and learnings

Several assumptions were made during the development of the project and its initial implementation stages which have since been proven inaccurate, often with considerable impacts to the project team's ability to meet its goals. The purpose of addressing these assumptions is not to lay blame on any person or group, but rather to examine what was assumed, why, and how the team has recalibrated. Ultimately, these reflections are potential lessons for future initiatives. Below is a discussion of the main assumptions and the approaches implemented to course correct the project.

The portal's capabilities

The capabilities of the Orbis/Magnet portal were misunderstood at the onset of the project. The assumptions around the portal can be categorized as follows: 1) Compatibility with existing infrastructure, 2) Functionality of use, and 3) Data tracking abilities.

Compatibility with existing infrastructure

Four of the PSIs participating in the pilot project were already using Orbis for their internal WIL postings while the other three PSIs were not. The centralized portal offered by the pilot project was meant to seamlessly integrate with the existing PSI Orbis systems, or function in lieu of a PSI-specific Orbis system. This has not been the reality. Orbis systems are personalized to each PSI's needs. The centralized portal is not immediately compatible with the personalized Orbis systems. This has required the PSI staff and the Secretariate to flag issues and modification requests to the technology partners, some of which have taken months to implement. In the meantime, workarounds for the incompatibility issues were employed by the Secretariate to some success, but these workarounds required additional manual labour from the team, therefore taking their attention away from their other responsibilities. Further, Orbis systems are configured to work with the student information systems (SIS) in use at each PSI. PSIs use different SISs and Orbis is not compatible with every SIS. Of the three PSIs that were not already using Orbis, at least one recently implemented a new SIS with which Orbis does not yet have a precedent for compatibility. Since this interview was conducted, HESA has confirmed that the institution is working with Orbis to integrate the systems. Nonetheless, this remains a lesson for future projects to consider software compatibility when assessing timelines for implementation of Orbis.

One of the project's initial value propositions was to provide the Orbis platform for the duration of the pilot project to PSIs that did not currently use it. However, the delays in starting the project reduced the three years the PSIs would have Orbis to a maximum of two years. Once the project was off the ground, some PSIs were still in the planning stages of developing their WIL programs and thus were not yet ready to work with Orbis to personalize the portal for their institution. As recently as November 2023, these PSIs have not yet implemented Orbis, but they are in the testing stages of their first portal designs. Nonetheless, they now face a cost-benefit decision. It could take around a year to

personalize Orbis to a PSI's needs. This timeline is determined by the PSI's capacity levels, the IT capacity of the institution, the level of priority of the implementation, the relationship between relevant institutional units, and general bureaucracy at the institution. At that point, the proposed three-year runway of Orbis—which would demonstrate to the PSI whether the system is worth continued investment—is down to less than one year. Is it still a value add? Or is it no longer a prudent use of the institution's time and effort? The cost to continue using Orbis after the pilot is over can be close to \$25,000 a year—a prohibitive amount for smaller institutions. Some PSI staff estimated that it would take five years of continued use of the Orbis platform to truly determine whether it was a worthy investment for the institution. Short of that, the cost was not feasible for an institution that has no room to gamble with its finances. This issue ties into a larger one affecting the project: an underestimation of the time and ongoing work required of the PSIs and their staff to make this pilot project function as proposed.

Functionality of use

Issues with the useability of the portal continued after the Beta testing phase in Spring 2023. The Secretariate is consistently working with the technology partners to remedy these issues, but the time it takes to do so is an unanticipated addition to the team's workload. Functionality issues are sometimes the cause of compatibility issues with PSIs' existing systems, requiring further individualized remedies. Many employers did find the portal easy to use, thus from their perspective it has been smooth and intuitive to post a WIL position and they appreciated that the portal made it much faster to reach more PSIs. To note, however, is that more than one employer interviewed shared that the EE team essentially posted their WIL position for them, so they had little to say about the functionality of the portal. While these employers shared this as a positive part of the experience, it would not be a sustainable service if employer participation increases, which is an ultimate goal.

The PSI staff had little to say about the functionality of the portal. Overall, PSI staff either shrugged off the portal as something with which they rarely interact, or discussed the issues they encountered with its integration into their institutional WIL infrastructure. In some institutions, only one or two people responsible for WIL ever see the full list of WIL opportunities that come in through the portal. They accept and reject the postings at their own discretion. One staff member shared that most postings they saw were for programs their institution did not offer, or they were for full-time salaried positions that were not in line with their WIL parameters, an issue that has since been resolved by the PE team. Postings like these were not distributed through the institution or to students, which may not align with employer expectations for wide reach. However, discussions with the EE team for this evaluation revealed that an example like this may be a symptom of some PSI staff misunderstanding or not knowing that employers with postings such as these may be open to re-scoping the opportunity to better aligned with the PSI's WIL types and needs. The PSIs original understanding of the project being primarily about the portal may skew their expectations for the individualized services and support the Secretariate can offer.

Data tracking abilities

It was assumed that the portal would allow the Secretariate to track which students found a WIL position through the portal, which students were hired for that position, and the socio-demographic information of those students. The project funders' required metrics reflect these expectations. However, the portal was not set up to easily capture this information, and even if it is eventually updated to allow for this, success depends on the PSIs' willingness to provide that data to the Secretariate. This data is essential to responding to the project's funders' required metrics and desired evidence of success. As described in the previous section, Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with PSIs are underway to allow for the sharing of this information.

At this stage of the pilot project and its evaluation, workarounds are set in place to try to gather some of this data. For instance, the Secretariate deploys a survey to employers 30 days after they post a WIL opportunity which asks them if they hired a student and with which institution the student is affiliated. Employers have so far had very low response rates to this survey. They also are not always aware which institution a student attends of whether the student is in a WIL program. HESA is also trying to capture some of this information in its employer interviews by asking about the students hired. However, employers receive applications directly to their company inboxes or through their company's online application form. Not only are they only occasionally aware of which institution their students come from, but they do not know which students found their posting through the pilot project unless the employer only posted the position in the portal. Most employers posted the position in more than one location, so any insights about their students cannot be attributed to the work of the pilot project.

The role of PSIs and their staff

One of the pilot project's biggest potential assets was also its biggest hurdle: working with seven PSIs. It is a perennial challenge to foster collaboration among PSIs. Even when there is the will to collaborate—as there was amongst the senior leaders at the Calgary PSIs—PSIs are inherently unique ecosystems with varying governance models, infrastructures, program offerings, strategic priorities, and financial and human resources. This makes any collaboration between them (even on a straightforward operation) a matter of abstraction, compartmentalization, and compromise. WIL is not a straightforward operation. It is not even standardized within an institution, as different faculties, departments, and professors will hold variations of power and processes that function within the PSI's ecosystem. In interviews, PSI staff largely shared the perception that the effects of this complex starting point on the project flow—like requiring seven MoUs instead of one and the challenges of building collaboration amongst WIL programs at disparate stages—were not sufficiently understood nor prepared for during the development and implementation of the project. This has resulted in a rift in trust between PSI staff and the pilot project's staff and mission. Most of the PSI staff expressed continued hope that the project's aims would be met, but many of them were also battling skepticism that this would be possible given the current parameters. In part, this is due to the delays in getting the project staffed and off the ground, which shortened the project's runway.

Most of the initial senior leaders that came together to develop this project are no longer in the same positions at their institution, if there at all. This greatly affects buy-in and operationalization of the project's activities as the institutional knowledge of the project's origins and benefits have been largely lost. Many PSI staff explained that they knew there was an expectation from a senior leader at their institution that they participate and contribute to the project. However, they began working on the project with an ill-defined understanding of its goals, how they applied specifically to their institution, and the effort it would take on their end to meet these goals. A few of the PSI staff felt comfortable going back to their senior leadership to discuss the project and its hurdles and develop strategies to make the project work best for their needs, but others felt they were left on their own to make the project work without re-evaluation. The result has been some institutions participating only to the extent that is needed to satisfy this directive, while other institutions have planned how to best utilize the project's resources to meet their needs.

What remains for the PSI staff working on the project is a directive from above to participate without the necessary understanding of the project's initial purpose, which is needed to re-evaluate the project's effects. When interviewed, some PSI staff shared that they felt pressure from above to work on the project but lacked direction and an avenue through which to discuss the project's hurdles with senior leadership at their institution. There was at once a general belief that this project's goals were worthwhile, but no path through which those working on the project could take the steps necessary to re-evaluate the project activities as gaps and issues began to be revealed.

The delay in the project's start also severely decreased the amount of time allotted to the Secretariate to reflect on its strategies for engagement with the PSIs, and it forced them to work within a timeline that is too fast and demanding for the PSIs. This brisk introduction by the Secretariate gave off the impression that they did not understand the operations of PSIs. This was in turn compounded by the sting that TalentED YYC has received \$7.5 million in funding, some of which comes from provincial sources that have consistently cut post-secondary operating budgets over the past several years.

Unfortunately, these initial interactions between the Secretariate and the PSI staff did not foster much good will. The purported benefits of the project also varied in importance to the different PSIs, so efforts to explain and show that the Secretariate's ultimate aim was to support the PSI staff and grow their WIL portfolios did not always resonate. The Secretariate, specifically the Process Enhancement Team whose primary stakeholder are the PSI partners, has worked tirelessly to adapt their approaches and their offerings to best suit each individual PSI. The project has struggled to make headway with some PSIs who have not softened their impressions.

The project also underestimates the amount of work required from the PSI staff, and expectations for compliance have not been received well. To put it simply: the project as developed had little understanding of the copious amounts of work, time, and input it required from PSI staff to accomplish its goals. While buy-in from the PSIs was considered secured at the highest level of the institutions, the true cost of the project was not planned for nor mitigated. In fact, developments during the project's current run,

ranging from portal functionality to an additional funder, have only increased the expectations of PSI staff engagement.

BHER funding as within scope of the pilot project

In May 2023, the Secretariate announced that they had secured additional funding for the project from Business Higher Education Roundtable (BHER). This funding is slotted for what BHER calls “innovative WIL,” conceptualized as events run by or with employers that attract students to prepare them for a standard WIL opportunity. Examples include hackathons and bootcamps. The reasoning for accepting this funding was that innovative WIL responded to employer comments that some students are not ready for standard WIL, and that employers are not ready to accept students for standard WIL without first seeing them in action at these events. “Innovative WIL” was thus perceived as a bridging initiative that could increase employer buy-in for providing WIL opportunities.

However, the terms of BHER’s funding are tangential to those of the original pilot project’s funders, and in fact duplicate efforts in some spaces. For instance, while the MC team’s original branding mission was to attract employers, they found they needed to market to students to promote “innovative WIL” events. This switch in audience is no small change. To get in touch with students, the Secretariate reached out to its PSI partners to ask them to promote these events. The PSI staff who discussed this request shared their frustration with it and framed it as another example of the Secretariate having a poor understanding of the needs of PSIs and an inability to stick to its main goals. The request was received as yet another ask of time and resources from the PSIs. More remarkably, it was a request with no perceived benefit for the PSI staff as “innovative WIL” is not recognized by these institutions, nor do they perceive iWIL as meeting the provincial government’s parameters for WIL relevant to the performance-based funding model.

While the adjective “innovative” has been used in relation to WIL by the Government of Canada and by CEWIL, BHER’s concept of “Innovative WIL” is not in the world lexicon, the literature on WIL, or in any WIL practice other than what BHER has put forward. Innovative WIL does provide students with opportunities to learn and interface with employers, but as a brand-new concept whose definition, parameters, and quality standards have yet to be established and evaluated, it does not match the rigour expected of traditional WIL opportunities. Therefore, any time spent on “innovative WIL” is not seen by PSIs as helping to satisfy the WIL requirements imposed by the provincial government, nor does it fit into any efforts to scale WIL within the established WIL ecosystem regionally, nationally, or globally. This could change, and TalentED YYC could steer efforts towards this end, but provincial sign-off would likely be needed to gain buy-in from PSIs.

Employers’ understanding of WIL and of the portal’s reach

It is well-known by WIL experts and practitioners that employers generally struggle to understand the types of WIL, their boundaries, and what they entail exactly. This is through no fault of the employers, but rather attributed to both WIL’s complexity and a lack of awareness about WIL outside of the post-secondary space. Interviews with

employers suggested that the impression of the TalentED YYC portal as a place to post WIL opportunities to reach all post-secondary students in Calgary may have inflated employer expectations.

It was clear in a few interviews that employer expectations for interest in their co-op positions were not informed by the whole picture of WIL, namely that the PSIs have guidelines about what constitutes WIL for different programs. In these cases, employers expressed being underwhelmed by the applications they received and curious why there were not more applications from students in programs they deemed relevant to the posting. Employers may have shared the expectation of receiving applications from students in such and such programs with the EE team, or the EE team may have suggested these programs as sources for relevant talent to the employer when they were determining the scope of the WIL opportunity. For instance, an 8-month part-time opportunity as a tour guide for a heritage site¹³ was considered a prime opportunity for a history student, but that student's program may not have guidelines for WIL yet as many PSIs are still developing these opportunities. It is ultimately the PSIs that will determine whether such an opportunity will be accepted onto their internal job board or otherwise presented to students, and this cannot be predicted by the EE team.

Drawing from the results of interviews with PSI staff, it is also clear that the total number of WIL opportunities posted in the portal are not being reflected at any of the institutions, as the postings are not guaranteed to be accepted by all PSIs. Some PSIs do not have centralized WIL offices, so only the programs that do offer WIL would ever see the postings and they would only accept those that relate to their programs. Some PSIs have centralized offices but do not yet have structures in place to offer and recognize WIL for all programs and thus would not accept postings that are irrelevant to established criteria in established programs. All of this leads to an understandable confusion amongst employers who are told that their posting will be promoted at every PSI in Calgary, potentially reaching every post-secondary student interested in a WIL opportunity, only to receive a handful of applications from people without the required knowledge or experience.

While the potential reach of the TalentED YYC portal is a main value proposition, it would do well for the EE team and the Secretariate at large to provide clearer expectations to employers.

¹³ This example is illustrative, not literal, to preserve the anonymity of which employers participated in the interviews.

6. Conclusions and looking ahead

The Calgary WIL Secretariate

The Calgary WIL Secretariate has been adapting to changing project parameters and expectations since it was formed. The division of responsibilities amongst the Secretariate's internal teams has largely been working well. The PE team and the EE team have provided good support to their respective stakeholders, pivoting their approach and focus as the stakeholders and the project parameters have required. Interviews with these stakeholders show that the teams have been responsive, friendly, and proactive in their support. A manager or team responsible for the technology would have been useful at the onset, but the extent of work required by the Secretariate to support the portal was not anticipated. These responsibilities have moved between members in the PE team, the EE team, and Executive Director as capacity allows. Otherwise, tasks are clearly divided between the four teams and the Executive Director. The Executive Director and the team managers have kept each other abreast of their respective teams' responsibilities, activities, and challenges. These lines of communication have limited the duplication of work, provided opportunities to collaborate between teams, and offered a space to brainstorm, troubleshoot, and otherwise facilitate the exchange of fresh perspectives on tasks, challenges, and process flows.

This report has mainly focused on the activities of the PE and EE teams as they are working directly with the main project stakeholders. The Marketing and Communications team has not been featured as much in this evaluation, but their work is invaluable to the project. The monthly reports they produce are a key source of data for HESA and all the project stakeholders. The MC team took on an exceptional challenge in introducing the work of TalentED YYC to an environment which was not very familiar with WIL and for which there is little precedent in the country, let alone the province or city. Over the past several months, they have been evaluating the best venues for outreach and refining their messaging and communications to align with the region's current readiness for supporting a larger WIL ecosystem. They have also needed to pivot their approaches to gear toward fresh audiences and maintain the audiences they have already grown. Time is a crucial resource for the MC team to develop the region's familiarity not only with TalentED YYC, but with work integrated learning.

For similar reasons to the MC team, the Research and Evaluation team has not been strongly featured in this report, but they too are providing integral contributions to the project. The lack of data collection from the portal has required the RE team to take on some of this work and coordinate with the other teams to collect the information required for periodic reports to funders. They have spent considerable time distributing student surveys and collecting data for BHER and for innovative WIL. The RE team has also coordinated with HESA and with Stone-Olafson, the market research firm that has provided data on Calgary employers' familiarity and reception to WIL.

Key successes and recommendations

The Calgary WIL Secretariate has contributed to building awareness of WIL amongst employers, providing education opportunities for employers and PSI staff, and connecting stakeholders to each other. The individual and institutional impacts of their work are described throughout this report and set the stage for future growth. In these actions, the Secretariate is contributing to the development of a WIL ecosystem in Calgary, which is still in its infancy. CED has a key role to play in facilitating the outreach and growth of the Secretariate through continued collaboration in events and leveraging of its employer contacts.

Employer engagement: relationship-building, educating about WIL, and growing recognition of TalentED YYC's value and offerings.

Based on the interviews conducted for this evaluation, one of the standout aspects of the project is the value the EE team has brought to the employers with whom it works, particularly the SMEs and start-ups. While the volume of employers working with TalentED YYC is not yet near the project's ultimate goal, the employers that have worked with the EE team have had very positive experiences. This creates a strong foundation of employer engagement moving forward. This is especially crucial since most of the employers interviewed found out about TalentED YYC through their networks, either through events held by CED or through word-of-mouth from CED and Secretariate staff. Employers satisfied with their experience with the EE team and thankful for the value of the TalentED YYC portal may in turn spread the word about their experience and continue to grow an organic recognition of TalentED YYC's offerings. In November 2023, the MC team interviewed employers for video testimonials to leverage this positive outcome of the EE team's dedicated work.

Moving forward: employer engagement and education in conversation with PSIs

The Secretariate's EE team has laid a foundation for employer engagement in Calgary and is beginning to fill a gap in the WIL ecosystem that has been validated by WIL practitioners at partnered PSIs. The tasks of building employers' understanding of WIL, prospecting for new opportunities and sectors that could offer WIL experiences, and keeping in close and consistent communication with employers in their pipeline offer essential value to all stakeholders in WIL. It serves the business-facing portion of the pilot project's core purpose as a set of interventions that takes explicit account of the known and postulated flows of resources, knowledge, power, and decision-making within and among the members of the WIL ecosystem (e.g., funders, governments, PSIs, business associations, and students). The work of building awareness and educating a population is long-term and requires the multi-faceted approach of the EE team, including outreach, networking and educating stakeholders. Plans for 2024 reach into the next and crucial phase of such work by creating spaces for conversations between employers and the PSI WIL practitioners who can best speak to their students' skills and abilities and who are best placed to determine with employers how their students can provide and receive value from employers' WIL experiences.

Process enhancement: building relationships, communal knowledge, and providing opportunities for networking and peer-support.

The project’s design has brought challenges for the PE team’s work with PSIs, but through this the PE team has identified a wealth of possibilities for the support it can offer PSIs moving forward. It has recently started offering workshops for WIL practitioners in PSIs which are a direct result of extended communication and consultation with the members of the CoP. These workshops have been received positively from attendees and are set to continue in 2024. The PE team has also been developing resources to meet PSI needs at all levels of WIL program development. The PE team’s current activities and those planned for 2024 will align the team’s function to that of ACE-WIL, which connects WIL practitioners across British Columbia and the Yukon to learn from each other and build the WIL ecosystem across the province and territory.

Moving forward: a WIL community and support network primed for scaling

The PE team is actively collecting and reflecting on PSI feedback on their work, which has helped them refine their focus and approach moving forward. The CoP is gathering steam as the outputs of their collaboration—like the CoP subcommittees and the PSI workshops—are serving the dual purpose of filling gaps in the WIL ecosystem and exemplifying the PE team’s commitment to listen and support the PSIs, thus deepening the relationships between the PE team and the PSI WIL practitioners.

The first *Conversations on Calgary WIL* workshop of 2024 will be continuing the discussion about what an Alberta WIL group could look like and what its purposes could be, hints of which are already being demonstrated by these PSI workshops. They are showing the desire for and benefits of communication and collaboration as WIL practitioners use the space to identify key issues, think through solutions, collectively problem-solve, and generally widen the network of WIL practitioners to be inclusive of all the partnered PSIs, including those fresh to the table and perhaps otherwise solitary in their field at their own institution.

Key challenges and recommendations

Many of the project’s key challenges can be traced to the project development stage, prior to the hiring of any Secretariate staff. The project’s delay and thus shortened timeline greatly impacted the Secretariate’s opportunity to process and plan its strategies for engagement. This has caused the need to take a trial-and-error approach to some activities.

The Orbis and Magnet portal: a “one-size-fits-all” tool that did not live up to expectations.

The portal by Orbis and Magnet was poised as the main pillar and value of the project and has not lived up to expectations, despite constant tweaks to make it more useful than at the project’s onset. The initial framing of this piece of technology as a solution to the

complexities of WIL missed the essential role of relationships to the practices of WIL, in exchange for a supposedly easy and straightforward technological solution. The project's parameters were well-developed in some respects but have been impacted by assumptions about the project's context and the portal's capabilities that did not reflect the reality that employers and PSIs are so diverse in their needs that one piece of technology could not be—and need not be—a one-size-fits-all solution. It is unclear whether the incorrectness of these assumptions was unforeseeable or due to an under-development or under-familiarity with the complexities of WIL, as some people close to the project have suggested during HESA's evaluation activities. Constructively, key staff at the Secretariate are well-versed in the complexities of WIL and have been active from the start to mitigate and fix the challenges with the portal that have presented themselves.

Moving forward: the portal as one tool in the Secretariate's kit, serving some better than others (and that's okay)

In HESA's interviews with employers, it was large companies with histories of utilizing WIL as part of their recruitment, retention, and success strategies that were best served by the portal. The employer representatives that spoke with HESA were entirely familiar with WIL, had full buy-in from their team and their superiors, and had infrastructure to maintain a standardized WIL experience for students. In sum, they did not need to be read into the WIL ecosystem or educated about the benefits of WIL; these were well-established to them. The portal, being a technological interface that streamlines the work of posting WIL opportunities across the seven PSI partner's job boards, served its purpose to near perfection for these employers. The only improvement they could suggest for the EE team was to expand the portal's reach, thereby further streamlining their work.

The portal may not have been the standout solution to employer uptake of WIL for SMEs and start-ups—that role is better filled by the EE team's engagement work—but it does fulfill a key role for large companies and provides an economic benefit of reducing workload for their employees managing WIL experiences. Such a success can be leveraged by the EE team for further employer prospecting and by the MC team in its external-facing communications and marketing.

Contextual challenge: low employer awareness of WIL

Employers have a low awareness of WIL and of the benefits of WIL students to their companies. This has presented a challenge in recruiting employers and in working with employers to meet some of the WIL program requirements of PSIs.

Moving forward: continue employer engagement and education activities

Deliberately focus much of the EE team's priorities on developing and sustaining community education about WIL, in partnership with the PE team and their PSI contacts; the MC team and their outreach activities; and CED, CCC, and CCVO and their employer and networking leads.

Contextual challenge: PSIs greatly differ in their WIL programming and capacity

PSIs are at various stages of WIL programming, adding a wrench to the already considerable challenge of facilitating collaboration between PSIs. There is a great deal of difference in a PSI that has had WIL programs for nearly a century, like SAIT, and one that is just starting to develop these programs, like AUArts.

Moving forward: build up the Calgary WIL ecosystem and expand the PSI network

Continue the CoP and *Conversations on Calgary WIL* activities that foster the WIL practitioner community and demonstrate the usefulness of collective discussion and problem-solving from the different perspectives of PSIs. Continue discussions to build an Alberta WIL group to increase the diversity of partner PSIs so that each institution may find a peer from whom to learn and share the collective goal to share knowledge and promising practices.

Contextual challenge: the GoA's non-holistic framing of WIL in economic terms

The Government of Alberta has articulated a vested interest in WIL, but its understanding of WIL in economic, skill, and talent terms does not necessarily align with the holistic approach of PSIs who offer a variety of WIL types not all geared to direct economic impact. The approach of the GoA is reflected in some of the project's funders' expectations for economic impact assessments and quantitative key performance indicators. The importance of relationship-building in WIL, and of providing students with quality, collaborative, and reflective WIL opportunities are not given as much weight in these perceptions of WIL and its purpose.

Moving forward: educate the GoA and advocate for clearer WIL definitions

Create and maintain lines of communication with relevant GoA representatives to stay abreast of the government's evolving understanding and categorizing of WIL. Continue to invite these representatives to CoP meetings or *Conversations on Calgary WIL* sessions—and to events organized through the EE team's emergent employer network—to both educate and advocate for clearer and more holistic definitions and expectations for WIL.

Contextual challenge: the GoA does not clearly identify "projects" as a WIL type

The WIL opportunities that TalentED YYC is categorizing as "projects" are in line with one of CEWIL's WIL types and feature the core components of traditional WIL: bringing course concepts into practice within a work environment; having the supervision and support of an instructor; and reflecting on the experience and learnings. However, projects are not a defined category of WIL type under the Government of Alberta, though they ostensibly fall under the "other" category.

Moving forward: advocate to the GoA to include projects as a defined WIL type

Gather partner input and support to make a case to the Government of Alberta to add projects as a defined WIL type.

Contextual challenge: securing buy-in for iWIL activities

The GoA does not include iWIL activities in PSIs' total institutional WIL offerings, which is the metric that determines institutions' funding amounts since the establishment of performance-based funding. The project's partner PSIs are therefore mostly unwilling to support the Secretariate's iWIL activities because they do not contribute to the pressing work of expanding WIL opportunities to all of their students.

Moving forward: determine iWIL's place within the WIL ecosystem in Calgary

Innovative WIL activities present direct connections between employers and students and opportunities for intensive learning experiences, which falls closely in line the GoA's conceptualization of WIL in terms of economic impact and labour market strengthening. The connection between learning and work also aligns with experiential learning activities, if not directly with traditional WIL. The Secretariate can continue to collect data and feedback about its iWIL activities to determine how it fits into the WIL ecosystem in Calgary. In future, iWIL could potentially be incorporated in the WIL portfolio of activities in some fashion, with its economic and labour-related strengths underscored.

Looking ahead

Evaluating the project

Current actions are setting the project up for success in the next phases. The following are key actions with their anticipated impacts in the next phase.

Action in present phase	Anticipated impact in next phase
Building name recognition	Increases word of mouth referrals, trust in the project. The number of new employers using the portal is increased at a modest but exponential rate.

Creating an employer pipeline	Starts next phase with more warm contacts than at the beginning, as well as repeat employers. Demonstrates attentiveness and commitment to the time it takes to do this work, providing employers with the time needed to envision their participation.
Compiling resources to respond to PSI and employer requests and needs	Responding to a need from stakeholders and providing a service that drives people to the project. Deepens relationships with PSIs and employer community in Calgary, builds recognition of TalentED YYC as a resource and expert team in the space.
Gaining an understanding of the different PSIs' infrastructures, current state of WIL, and willingness to buy-in/participate in the pilot project	Being better equipped to help PSIs where they need, to calibrate expectations for participation from uninterested PSIs, to pass around learnings between PSIs in different stages of WIL development and implementation.

Recreating the project

Were this project to be recreated in another jurisdiction, several elements would be helpful for its success. These elements are gathered from expert knowledge as well as reflections on what has worked well in this project and what have been pressure points.

1. At the project development phase, employers and PSIs in the chosen region should be brought together to determine 2-3 shared goals at maximum. Once the goals are decided, an action-oriented plan can be built either within this group or in meaningful consultation with employers and PSIs.
2. Developing the project must include a plan to determine how PSIs can received direct enhancement to their own capacity to build and develop their WIL programming through their participation in the project, instead of demands on their capacity.
3. The region in which the project is based would likely benefit from having more than one PSI that wants to collaborate and understands the time implications of such work, or a region in which a single PSI has little to no prior WIL infrastructure, thus providing a clean slate without competing systems or institutions.
4. The region should either have a company ecosystem in which corporations and SMEs are ready and willing to take on students, or efforts towards building such an ecosystem should be built into the project or part of a pre-project campaign. To this end, the project would benefit from having a version of the CCC and CCVO that can connect the project to employers and vice versa.

5. A project Secretariate can be centralized—as in TalentED YYC—and hosted in an organization, institution, or government branch that is well aligned with the core goals of the project.
6. The Secretariate should be lean, at least at the beginning, to limit the capacity for scope creep, to cultivate positive optics with PSIs and employers, and to make the project’s funding stretch as far as needed to produce results. The Secretariate would be designed to primarily address shared employer and PSI goals, including a liaison for the PSIs and a liaison for the employers who work together.
7. A technological solution should not be bought until the goals and stumbling blocks of the project’s context are clearly identified and articulated.
8. A project with a single funder or multiple funders whose goals and funding cycles are in sync would contribute to the clarity of the project’s vision and a manageable project scope.

Scaling the project

Determining how a project such as this one could be scaled in the future is a key part of this evaluation. However, at this stage, the Secretariate is best served by focusing on meeting the expectations of its current stakeholders. The Secretariate needs to take steps to optimize the pilot project. The lessons and recommendations in the first two deliverables HESA provided the Secretariate hold several directions in which this could be achieved. Additionally, the paragraphs in this report titled “Opportunities for improvement” under the Employers and PSI staff sections provide invaluable feedback on what would be most beneficial to project stakeholders at this moment. A few of the large employers interviewed wanted the project to scale to Edmonton or throughout the province, but every PSI staff interviewed wanted the project to stay the course and make good on its initial offers of value. The next phase of the project has plenty of opportunities to apply the lessons learned in this first phase. The next evaluation will thus provide a stronger knowledge and data foundation through which to consider scaling up. Prior to any scaling up activities, the Secretariate needs to develop a theory of change that would grapple with the unique challenges and opportunities associated with scale-up.



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