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State of Skills Report

Work-Integrated Learning

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KEY INSIGHTS

1. Work-integrated learning can be effective in developing technical and soft skills among learners at different levels, including in high schools, colleges and universities and in professional roles.

2. Small and midsize enterprises are keen to participate in work-integrated learning programs but require additional support to participate effectively due to their limited capacity.

3. Sectoral approaches can be effective, but coordinators need a deep understanding of the labour market conditions, which requires a high degree of expertise.

4. Effectively serving underrepresented groups, especially Indigenous Peoples, has been and continues to be a significant challenge for work-integrated learning programs.

The Issue

As workforce needs shift rapidly, the demand for soft and technical skills continues to grow. This growth points to the need for education and training that effectively prepare students and older learners to meaningfully contribute to their industries and, more broadly, the economy. Recent economic disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and rising costs of living have reinforced the importance of educational experiences that impart skills that meet emerging labour market demands.

In recent years, work-integrated learning (WIL) has gained traction as a useful tool to meet skill demand. WIL is a form of experiential learning that incorporates workplace exposure and experience into curricular programming. Experiential learning is a component of an academic program that provides students with opportunities to learn through doing and reflection, allowing them to apply what they learn in real-world settings. It aims to increase both students' knowledge and capacity through various actionable experiences. The difference between experiential learning and WIL is that WIL bridges classroom learning with practical, work-based experience, allowing students and older learners to apply what they learn in workplace scenarios.

While Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL) recently published a broadly accepted definition of WIL, institutions understand and implement WIL inconsistently. For instance, some postsecondary institutions continue to define WIL solely according to their institution's vision, which reinforces differences in implementation and measurement of impacts of WIL programs. Institutions are not obligated to follow CEWIL's definition, which often leads to disagreements over whether a type of learning, such as co-op learning, internships, apprenticeships, etc., should be considered as WIL. The Future Skills Centre and its consortium partners have produced several reports on WIL that adhere to the definition set out by CEWIL.

When working with learners not currently enrolled in postsecondary institutions, the category "work-based learning" has been used. Like WIL and experiential learning, the central feature of work-based learning is a practical learning experience delivered at a work site or a simulated work site. This report includes findings from both the Future Skills Centre's work-based learning–related and WIL-related projects. The Future Skills Centre sees these two methods as complementary and capable of producing the same results: higher skills acquisition and an easier transition into employment or a new role.

WIL opportunities develop the essential skills that can fill gaps in the labour market, made possible through strong employer partnerships. These partnerships are critical because they shape meaningful WIL experiences: employers help design placements that reflect real-world tasks, offer mentorship and create inclusive learning environments. In turn, this collaboration ensures students gain not only technical skills but also soft skills such as critical thinking and analysis, leadership, collaboration and problem solving—on top of improving overall academic outcomes of students. WIL experiences can jump-start students' careers by providing direct exposure to on-the-job experience, further empowering the students to make informed career decisions. For employers, WIL addresses labour force gaps by providing access to potential hires to diversify their workforces. WIL experiences can also be advantageous for individuals belonging to equity-deserving groups, such as women, racialized persons, those from low-income households, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and adult learners, who often face multiple barriers to employment. Providing access to WIL can potentially support these groups to access wages to support their studies, networking and upskilling opportunities, which could launch their pathways into employment.While WIL can enhance labour market outcomes, evidence indicates that WIL benefits are not distributed evenly across all populations. Evidence suggests that individuals belonging to equity-deserving groups were found to be less likely to participate in WIL. International students have faced eligibility barriers for WIL opportunities that are funded by the federal government, leading employers to hesitate to hire these students. Similarly, adult learners, who may balance family responsibilities and face employment discrimination, may be challenged with accessing training opportunities, such as WIL, that could help them obtain meaningful employment. However, further research is needed to better understand and address specific barriers faced by these groups.

What We Investigated

Since 2019, the Future Skills Centre has invested over $65 million dollars in WIL-related projects. This includes work-integrated, work-based and experiential learning projects. These programs work with learners of all ages—high school, college and university students; mid-career workers; and currently unemployed persons.

Do learners obtain skills, employment or both by participating in WIL programs?

Training learners to more easily integrate into the labour force is at the heart of many WIL programs. Closing skills gaps has become a public policy priority in Canada over the past few years, as sectors like automotive and construction, among others, have struggled to fill their labour needs with adequately-skilled workers. WIL is one way to help fill this need. But does it actually work for learners of different age groups? Can learners acquire both technical and soft skills? Equally important, does it work across sectors? And do learners actually obtain jobs afterwards?

Across the Future Skills Centre's WIL-related projects, the evidence suggests a clear "yes" to these questions: learners of all ages are acquiring both technical and soft skills that are relevant across sectors. Many participants have also transitioned into employment as a result of their WIL experience. In some cases, the development of soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability—proved as important as the technical training. WIL programs that included employer engagement, sector-specific design, and wraparound supports were particularly successful in helping learners gain employment.

For example, we funded a project in partnership with Actua and Indigenous organizations, school boards, education providers and industry partners to promote skills among Indigenous high-school learners. The program blended traditional Indigenous ways of knowing with provincial science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) curricula to provide learners with a meaningful connection to their culture, as well as a pathway to using this knowledge while obtaining official high-school credits in STEM.

EDGE UP received two rounds of funding from the Future Skills Centre for the design and implementation of a sectoral-based training program with a WIL component in Alberta. The program sought to transition oil and gas workers into the IT industry. It delivered skills training across three different occupations: IT project management, full-stack software development and data analytics. The program culminated in a WIL project with a local employer in the IT sector.

Blue Door Support Services upskilled people who were currently unemployed and/or experiencing homelessness in construction techniques. After beginning the project, the team quickly realized the need for soft-skills acquisition, as their participants needed support with budgeting their time effectively and staying safe on job sites, which can often be hazardous. The model was successfully adapted and both skill sets were integrated.

What are some important components of successful WIL programs?

What exactly makes a training program effective? Are we able to identify some of the individual elements that make a program more effective?

ECO Canada used a dual-phase approach that involved a detailed skills mapping exercise that was later used to design training. The project analyzed the skill sets that oil and gas workers currently possessed alongside the skill sets the same workers would need to transition into the green building industry. Project coordinators and industry representatives then created training materials. Thus, the WIL component could target the essential skills needed to change industry while also maintaining a close relationship with employers to ensure relevance.

A program at University College of the North sought to both upskill Indigenous women in Northern Manitoba for employment in the IT industry and implement a "train-the-trainer" approach as a way to provide future cohorts with engaging, Indigenous-led instruction. After completing the program, Indigenous women were invited to return as mentors to future cohorts, increasing both their training and soft skills while also serving as models for the current cohort. Similar to both the Actua and Blue Door projects, this initiative led to both soft and technical skills development through a WIL model.

A project at McMaster University recognized that for many small and midsize enterprises (SMEs) that would like to implement newer technologies in their business models, human resources capacity is a significant challenge to being able to onboard outside talent. Therefore, with SME collaboration, the university designed a program that helps local SMEs host WIL opportunities for engineering students. In term, the participating SMEs benefit by gaining additional technological capacity through the students' contributions. Doing this required the team at McMaster to have a thorough understanding of each SME's needs and business model. While this element of the program was expensive—it required a full-time community outreach position to coordinate with SMEs at the university—it allowed for increased cohesion between the needs of learners and local SMEs.

Can we make the WIL ecosystem less complicated?

Similar to microcredentials, WIL programs have a tremendous amount of variety and complexity in their delivery. Part of this complexity stems from the fact that widely accepted definitions of what constitutes WIL have been difficult to establish at the institutional level. With this in mind, many institutions—colleges, universities and employers—have developed their own programs. Across this network of organizations, program parameters overlap somewhat, but they also diverge. As such, WIL clients are not always clear on what each individual WIL opportunity does and who certified it. Without a unifying framework and platform from which all WIL participants can access and update information, the ecosystem remains fragmented. One of the Future Skills Centre's programs sought to change this. Seeing the complicated nature of the WIL ecosystem in Calgary, the Future Skills Centre funded Calgary Economic Development to develop a strategy that would bring WIL opportunities from seven postsecondary institutions together under one umbrella. The current WIL programs offered among these institutions varied greatly: some had extensive offerings, others had very little. The impetus for those that did not have many to increase their offerings came from the Government of Alberta, which requires that WIL programs be available to all postsecondary students by 2030. The project proposed a "regional model" by which to bring these institutions together under a comprehensive, unified platform for the Calgary Metropolitan Region. Greatly ambitious, the project team was one of the first across Canada to both ask the question of whether this was possible and put a plan in action to simplify the ecosystem.

✔ What We're Learning

Finding alignment in goals helps determine success
WIL attracts multiple types of stakeholders, each with their own needs and goals; properly situating these stakeholders can, in part, determine program success. These stakeholders include:

1. learners—these can be students (high school, collegiate or university)
2. postsecondary institutions (colleges or universities)
3. government (provincial, territorial or federal)
4. employers

Often, needs and goals overlap across groups. One element that brought all stakeholders together was the effective design of the place or site where the training takes place. In successful programs, learners often praised the training sites as "providing authentic learning experiences" where their skills could be put to the test and they could start to visualize themselves at work. In this context, "authentic" refers to experiences where learners feel like they are with a professional team or "at work," as opposed to in a program. Creating this experience was also a goal for postsecondary institutions and employers. For all stakeholders, the skills development component was all the more impactful because the place where learning took place—either at a postsecondary institution–based training centre or at the employer's site—was authentic. This, in turn, helps raise the reputation of the program at the postsecondary level and makes the WIL experience more useful for the employers, who are more likely to train a learner that they want to hire. Understanding overlap like this is a crucial first step in developing a WIL program and securing buy-in across client groups.

Assessing individual barriers to success early on fosters learner success

Sometimes it's necessary to assess the needs of learners separately from those of employers, governments and postsecondary institutions. For example, when working with equity-deserving groups, program coordinators must get a thorough understanding of their learners' goals and support needs at the very beginning of the design phase of a program. This was particularly true for the Actua and University College of the North programs, both of which worked with Indigenous learners. The programs were designed around "blended learning" principles, which take elements from non-Indigenous training programs and blend them with Indigenous ways of knowing. This, in turn, helped both programs foster a sense of community essential to Indigenous participants. Equally important, however, was the realization of program staff that their learners needed wraparound support to be able to attend the program. Several projects, especially those working with equity-deserving groups, implemented this holistic approach to serve their learners and support their professional development. Blue Door found that a dedicated administrative position needed to be hired to properly assess the level of social support needed for each learner to fully participate in the program.

Centring regional and sectoral needs helps learners transition into the workforce upon completion

WIL program designers need to have a thorough understanding of the sectoral or regional skills needed by industry, and the first step is to collaborate with industry stakeholders directly. Building this collaboration into the program is essential for learners' eventual transition into the labour force. The Future Skills Centre supported several projects that took a sectoral or regional approach to understanding employer needs. For example, several projects examined the transition of workers in the oil and gas industry to green building and the blue economy. The McMaster University project focused on local SME needs as they relate to new technology adoption, putting project staff in a better position to match their students' skill sets with each of the SMEs' needs. This allowed the program to build a reputation of success, drawing in more industry partners. At the end of The Future Skills Centre's investment, the program's lead reported a partner network of over 60 organizations, 120 WIL projects and over 100 prototypes developed for SMEs.

In-program evaluation can provide an important opportunity to pivot

WIL projects funded by the Future Skills Centre engaged learners to hear about what was working well and what could be improved. This allowed coordinators to integrate learners' suggestions during implementation. Participant feedback was especially important for initiatives that involved Indigenous ways of knowing; these initiatives strove to empower learners by giving them an equal voice in evaluating the program.

- The in-program assessment for the Construct program from Blue Door Support Services revealed an essential skills gap among their participants. This gave coordinators the evidence needed to redesign the program first around building the essential skills that would set participants up for success in the construction industry. These included first aid, health and safety awareness, working at heights, and Grade 12 mathematics. SkillPlan, Blue Door's partner, was able to provide additional tutoring and ensure that the course materials were designed specifically for adult learners transitioning into construction.
- EDGE UP's in-program evaluation efforts also allowed the staff to pivot. In that case, it made them rethink the parameters of success. This was primarily due to the changing needs of the sectors that the program sought to serve. During the program, the oil and gas industry unexpectedly expanded (it had contracted during program development), leading to higher wages in the industry. This occurred at the same time that the IT sector in Calgary was contracting, leading to lower wages. These two factors together made the decision a lot easier for some EDGE participants to go back to oil and gas rather than taking a lower salary. Program staff found that although rates of employment in the IT sector were lower than they had expected, participants were consistently using the skills they had learned in the program in their current roles nine months after graduating, showing a longer-term impact that would be worth exploring in future evaluations of the program.

Partnerships are essential to WIL success

Across the Future Skills Centre's WIL portfolio, the quality of the partnerships helped determine whether programs were successful or not. Below are several examples of elements of partnership building that worked, and some that could be improved.

What works:

- **Co-developing training centres**. For potential WIL program promoters that are not able to provide everything that a WIL program needs to succeed, co-developing a training centre can allow for additional expertise, supplies or training capacity to be baked into the programming. Their partnership with C4S allowed the University College of the North to fully stock their training centre with the technology needed while also creating a training centre that felt like a real job site. One university representative said, "*The depot [training centre] functioned according to all of the protocols dictated by C4S. Consequently, the students gained proficiency in workplace skills such as safe work procedures, documentation and reporting, inventory control, work flow scheduling, parts management, and a range of other employment and management skills. The C4S depot was not a simulation; it was a functioning shop performing real work."*
- **Engaging employers early and often.** When collaborating with employers, attention needs to be paid to how they fit into the structure of the WIL program before the program begins. Having a seat at the table helps assure employers or other partners that their goals and the program's goals align. To ensure their participants gained exposure to construction industry organizations, Blue Door cast their net wide at the beginning of the project and recruited several unions, including LiUNA, and Durham YMCA. The LiUNA partnership created the basis of a professional network for participants and educated them on WIL programs traditionally managed by unions, like apprenticeships.
- **Supporting SMEs to participate in WIL.** Programs cannot take for granted that SMEs have a thorough understanding of what WIL is and what it can do for them and learners alike. Identifying SME partners and bringing them on board with tailored supports is essential to maintain their

engagement. WIL programs cannot take for granted that employers have the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in these initiatives.

What needs improvement:

- **Properly aligning participant skills with WIL placements.** Balancing needs and goals of employers can sometimes be difficult and lead to skill mismatches. The EDGE UP program found that while the majority of its participants received a WIL placement that did overlap with their skills and interests, a portion did not. While valuable skills are still acquired from exposure to fields for which learners are not entirely trained, additional attention should be paid to ensuring that WIL placements align with established skill sets.

- **Consensus building**. Any project aiming to bring together WIL offerings across multiple institutions should create and sign a memorandum of understanding at the beginning of each project that outlines a concrete set of roles and responsibilities to be shared and understood by all stakeholders.
- **Bridging the gap between WIL completion and "what's next."** While there is no universally agreed upon plan for what should happen after learners finish a WIL placement, more effective programs provide ongoing support that addresses the needs of learners that do not transition immediately into employment. EDGE UP found a number of program graduates that eventually lost the knowledge and skills acquired because they were not able to transition immediately into employment. These learners required additional coaching and training to be able to show prospective employers that they were indeed ready to enter the workforce. Having personalized plans for learners that do not have a job offer during the program would better help set them up for success and potentially reduce the efforts required later on to upskill them again.

★ Why It Matters

Technology and net-zero transitions increase labour market volatility and job displacement. Now more than ever, workers need the right support to navigate career pathways and transition between jobs and sectors as smoothly as possible. WIL presents an important opportunity for learners, employers, postsecondary institutions and governments alike. On the learner side, WIL has been shown to lead to soft and technical skills acquisition and an easier transition to employment. For employers, engagement in WIL can lead to recruiting learners with skills tailor-matched with their needs, which is especially useful for SMEs with limited HR capacity.

Accurately mapping necessary and transferable skills helps in designing more relevant programming. Producing high-quality labour market information is valuable for the workforce development sector, but translating it immediately to upskilling programs using WIL is even more impactful. Policymakers looking to replicate success stories should look to partners that propose collaborative models—with employers at the table—seeking to provide a complete map of skills that workers already possess before entering the program, as well as the ones they will need to transition into the future jobs.

Creating more widespread access to WIL should be a priority. The project at the University College of the North showed the need for WIL programs in Northern, rural and Indigenous communities. It furthermore provides a road map for how these programs can succeed. With innovative models like "train-the-trainer" blended with traditional Indigenous ways of knowing, First Nations can take more control over programs that serve their communities while partnering with employers committed to equality and Reconciliation.
Sectoral approaches can work, but they need time and expertise to succeed. Because of the ever-changing nature of the labour market, an in-depth understanding of each sector's needs is critical, as well as the ability to pivot based on current labour market conditions. Policymakers and funders should note that defining success for sector programs can depend on several factors, and they should work with partners to better understand how shifting contexts impact outcomes.

What's Next

Work-integrated learning is an important tool for helping individuals gain the skills, experience and connections they need to enter the workforce or transition into new roles. The Future Skills Centre will continue to invest in innovative approaches to WIL, including the documentation and evaluation of successful approaches that can be brought to scale.

Moving forward, the Future Skills Centre is interested in:

- WIL supports that are tailored to SME needs;
- WIL programs that seek to build regional consensus on WIL at the postsecondary institution level;
- WIL programs that are created and led by Indigenous communities and that centre Indigenous ways of knowing.

The Future Skills Centre will also continue to share insights on WIL with decision-makers across the skills and training ecosystem with the ultimate goal of improving policy and practice.

Projects in this Report

Accelerating the Smooth Adoption of Smart Systems – McMaster University

Energy to Digital Growth Education and Upskilling Program – EDGE UP

Empowering the Northern Workforce: Information Technology Readiness in the North – University College of the North

Construct – Blue Door Support Services

Development of Canada's National Occupational Standards for a Sustainable Blue Economy – ECO Canada

For Credit InSTEM Program – Actua

Calgary Regional WIL Secretariat and Portal – Calgary Economic Development

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