

**Modernizing Ontario`s Universities – An Analysis of the Feasibility of  
Implementing a Sector-Wide Work-Integrated Learning Policy Program**

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## Introduction

The role of post-secondary education is not what it used to be. What was once reserved for purely academic endeavors has become a requirement to enter the modern job market. Indeed, the phrase “the bachelor degree is the new high school diploma” is all too common today (Rampbell 2014; Git 2014). It is therefore unsurprising that many universities now offer co-op programs, internships, and volunteerism, that provide students with work experience to help them enter the labour force following graduation. Recently, the Government of Ontario’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel recommended making these experiences a graduation requirement at all Ontario universities (Ontario 2016). This proposal has received support from Premier Kathleen Wynne herself as well as from business groups advocating for “job-ready” university graduates (Leslie 2016; Chiose 2016). However, as this report will explain, implementing this policy proposal, or any proposal aimed at increasing the number of these opportunities at universities, may prove to be very challenging. This is largely due to the autonomy that Ontario’s universities have traditionally enjoyed over their own operations, but also because of the significant administrative and financial burdens associated with the operation of these programs. Ultimately, we hope that this report will be of use to the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (henceforth referred to as “the Ministry”) in implementing the recommendations of the Expert Panel to make these types of learning opportunities more accessible to students.

In this report, we will refer to these types of learning opportunities using the umbrella term “work-integrated learning”, or WIL opportunities. While different

terminology is used in other jurisdictions, like applied learning or experiential learning, WIL appears to be the conventional term used by academics in Canada. This report is largely divided into 4 sections. In the first section, the value of providing WIL opportunities for students, employer partners and host universities will be explored. In the second section, the current state of WIL opportunities in Ontario will be explored and a typology devised to classify the various programs offered at different universities. In the third section, this report will explore what the provincial government is currently doing to promote the development of WIL opportunities in Ontario. In the final section, this paper will describe the institutional structure of higher education in Ontario and what this means for the government's goal of implementing a sector-wide WIL initiative in the province.

## **I - Benefits of WIL**

Many benefits to WIL have been identified that extend to students in the programs, the universities offering these program and even employer partners working with the students. Most studies have focused on the benefits to students, which include better employment outcomes, career exploration, personal development and other positive financial outcomes. For example, a study at Simon Fraser University found that 94% of students who took part in their co-op program felt that it provided them with a competitive advantage in the job market, and that, in general, students who completed more work terms during their studies found jobs more quickly than those who didn't (SFU 2011). Another study by Drysdale *et al.* focusing on the employment outcomes of 10,000 Canadian university graduates found that, on average, graduates who had taken a co-op program earned nearly 20% more in their first year in the workforce compared to non-co-op

graduates (Drysdale *et al* 2009). Finally, students graduating from co-op programs in Canada are found to graduate with less debt than their counterparts who did not pursue co-op programs during their studies (Bayard and Greenlee 2009). Furthermore, these benefits are not limited to co-op programs; much literature has been published regarding the benefits of internships and service learning programs in Canada, too (see Stirling *et al* 2014; Davis and Jordan ND for reviews). There also appears to be personal development benefits to taking part in WIL programs. A study by Purdie *et al* (2011) showed that greater participation in WIL opportunities was associated with an increase in hope and intrinsic goal orientation, suggesting that WIL has positive psychological effects as well as practical employment-related benefits.

The benefits of WIL programs extend beyond just the students, though. Employers certainly benefit from these programs by being able to identify and access new talent early and by being able to give back to their respective industries. Indeed, a study by Atkinson *et al.* (2015) found that these were the most common reasons given by employers for taking part in WIL programs. These results were corroborated by a similar study performed by PhillipsKPA in Australia (2014). The strongest evidence for the benefit of WIL programs for employers, however, is their continued involvement in these programs through the years.

Finally, while significantly less-studied, there is evidence to suggest that institutions offering WIL opportunities also benefit from the programs. Importantly, a study of Ontario universities interviewed informants from nine institutions to determine what were the perceived benefits of offering WIL programs to students. The study found that the most

important factors for universities was a perceived improvement in relationships with employers, industries and communities, as well as a better institutional reputation. For universities, these benefits can lead to positive influences in student recruitment and campus funding opportunities (Sattler 2011). Together, this research shows that there are clear benefits to WIL for students, certainly, but also for employers and universities. Therefore, Premier Wynne's push to expand the availability of WIL programs in Ontario's universities appears justified and would likely benefit all parties involved. With the benefits of WIL programming established, it remains to be seen what individual universities in Ontario are currently doing to offer more WIL programs and ensure program quality. We will address this issue in the following sections.

## **II - Institutional scan of WIL opportunities in Ontario**

"Work-integrated learning" brings to mind images of students in the workplace, perhaps in an engineering or investing firm, surrounded by experienced professionals acting as mentors to these young new talents. These types of experiences are typically limited to either co-op opportunities or internships. However, WIL can include many other activities that do not necessarily take place in a strictly work-oriented environment. This section of the report will begin by outlining a typology of WIL activities that will then be used to classify the various programs offered by universities in Ontario.

### **i - WIL typology for Ontario's universities**

For this report, we have attempted to generate a typology of WIL opportunities that will best-apply specifically to universities in Ontario. In doing so, we propose two main

categories; *workplace experience*, which occurs primarily in a workplace environment, and *non-work partnerships* which occur outside of the workplace. We have further divided these two categories into subcategories which are described in more detail below. We have focused on differentiating these programs based on their pedagogical goals, duration, location, and the academic fields in which the programs are typically offered.

### *Workplace experience*

- *Work experience*: Work experience is what most people imagine when they think of WIL. Programs within this category that are relevant to the university setting include co-ops and internships. The goal of these types of programs typically include providing students with experience in the workforce, combining academic theory with practice, developing professional skills and networks, and exploring potential career directions. These types of programs usually last for at least an academic semester and often up to a year, and students usually do not take other classes while they are working. They generally take place in the workplace, and are popular with business, engineering and increasingly computer science degree programs.

### *Non-work partnerships*

- *Applied Research*: Applied research programs are common to many research-based degree programs, including natural and social science programs. The pedagogical goals of these programs is primarily to allow students to apply the theory learned in

class to a research project designed to answer a specific question in the field. It also allows students to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Finally, these projects allow students to develop technical and soft research skills. Research projects are normally one to two academic semesters in length and students pursue other courses at the same time as their research. This means that the research is usually performed on campus with a departmental supervisor.

- *Field Courses:* Field courses are credit-bearing courses offered by the university that take place in the field relevant to the program of study. The learning goals for students in these courses is to develop skills relevant to their field of study that are important in research, professional work, or both. Field courses are typically short and intensive experiences, and may only be 1 - 2 weeks in duration. These courses are often completed off-campus at a specific location, but are occasionally performed on campus. These courses are prevalent across most undergraduate degree programs, but especially in environmental, ecological and geological sciences.
- *Service Learning:* Service learning opportunities are defined by their community-based approach to providing skill development and education to students, who often take on these programs on a volunteer basis. They often do not carry a credit value. Learning objectives for students in these programs include the application of theory to practical scenarios, career exploration, building a professional network within the community and, importantly, building a sense of community awareness.

These programs are typically one or two semesters in duration and take place at locally-based organizations. Students normally continue to attend class during these programs. Service learning programs are most prominent in arts, social sciences and public health degrees.

## **ii - WIL typology applied to Ontario's universities**

We have applied the typology of WIL opportunities described above to a select group of Ontario's universities. The results of this institutional scan are presented in table 1. A few important trends were identified from this scan.,

1. There does not appear to be a consensus within the university sector in Ontario as to what different WIL opportunities should be called. Importantly, none of the institutions investigated used the term "work-integrated learning" to describe any of their programming, despite this being the convention for research and academic groups like HEQCO and Academica Group. The one term that was universally accepted across all institutions was "co-op".
2. Individual departments within institutions have significant autonomy over the organization of their own WIL opportunities, including field courses, service-learning opportunities and internships. These all occur outside of the scope of a given university's dedicated co-op or work experience office.

3. There is significant variation in the number and types of WIL opportunities offered between different institutions, suggesting that not all institutions value these programs similarly. For example, the university of Waterloo is considered a global leader in cooperative learning and has dedicated office co-op and career centre. However, the University of Toronto's St. George campus has no centralized, dedicated co-op service and all internships or co-op opportunities are managed through individual academic departments.

Table 1: Survey of WIL opportunities at universities across Ontario.

	<b>Workplace Experience</b>	<b>Non-Work Partnerships</b>		
	Work Experience	Applied Research	Field Courses	Service Learning
<b>University of Toronto</b>	Work experience opportunities are varied at U of T. The Scarborough campus has its own co-op office, while the other campuses do not. Internship programs are organized by individual departments, including engineering, environmental science, and finance.	Applied research programs are offered in the form of honors research projects. These are department-specific.	Field courses are offered at the departmental-level. They are most common in archeology, anthropology, geology and environmental science programs.	U of T has a separate “Centre for community partnerships” responsible for co-curricular service learning. Academic service learning is organised at the departmental level and can be credit-bearing.
<b>Carleton University</b>	Carleton University has a separate Co-op office responsible for engaging with partners and presenting opportunities to students. The Co-op option can be elected by students from any academic program. Individual departments also provide internships opportunities, like political science and computer science.	Applied research programs are offered in the form of honors research projects. These are department-specific.	Field courses are offered at the departmental-level. They are most common in archeology, anthropology, geology and environmental science programs.	Carleton’s service-learning opportunities are hosted by the student experience office. There are few credit-bearing options for students.

<b>Waterloo</b>	Waterloo is widely recognized as having the largest co-op program in the world. Co-op opportunities are made available through a dedicated co-op and career centre. Due to the strength of the co-op program, internship opportunities are not apparent.	Applied research programs are offered in the form of honors research projects. These are department-specific.	Field courses are offered at the departmental-level. They are most common in biology and political science programs.	Service learning at Waterloo is limited to program specific offerings, such as the school of pharmacy's program. There is no dedicated service learning office.
<b>Queen's University</b>	Queen's has a limited centralized co-op/internship program offered through the school's career services office. However, many individual departments offer their own well-developed programs, including engineering, biochemistry and computer science.	Applied research programs are offered in the form of honors research projects. These are department-specific.	Field courses are offered at the departmental-level. They are most common in biology and geology programs.	Service learning is not a widely-used term at Queen's university. There is no dedicated office for service learning opportunities. The undergraduate medicine program encourages students to take part in service learning, but it is not mandatory.

### **III - Government WIL initiatives**

We have just explored what a sample of individual universities in Ontario are doing to provide WIL opportunities to students. This section of the report will describe what WIL-related initiatives and programs already exist within the government of Ontario, and what the results of these programs has been. In December 2015, the provincial government established The Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel. This group was tasked with developing a strategy to help the province's workforce adapt to a new and changing economy, and they were asked specifically to make recommendations on how to better prepare post-secondary education graduates for entering the workforce. This led to the recommendation that all university students should have at least one WIL experience by the time they graduate (Ontario 2016, 3). While this recommendation has received widespread support from politicians and business leaders, the government has yet to take any concrete action towards implementing it.

Two bills concerning WIL have recently been put forward in the Ontario legislature, but these remain under consideration by committees. The first is bill 172, which would establish an Advisory Council on Work-Integrated Learning. If established, this council would advise the Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Development on ways to increase WIL opportunities, ensure the quality of these opportunities and act as a liaison between government, universities and industry partners (Ontario 2014). The second bill, bill 64, is designed specifically to protect university-level interns by ensuring that they are fairly treated and paid by employers (Ontario 2015). Aside from these two examples, this report did not identify any other legislation aimed at increasing the availability of WIL

opportunities for students. It suggests that, until now, government officials have been content to let universities determine for themselves what is the optimal amount of WIL programming to offer.

#### **IV - Institutional analysis: governance structure of Ontario's universities**

This report has discussed what both universities and the government of Ontario have been doing to develop WIL programs across the province. While both institutions have taken steps in this regard, there appears to be a lack of a coordinated effort between the two which may explain why WIL program offerings have failed to keep up with student demand. To fully understand why this is the case, this section of the report will explain the historical and contemporary relationship between universities and the provincial government in Ontario. Only once this analysis has been completed can we begin to consider making recommendations of how to improve the working relationship between these two parties to develop the WIL sector in the province.

As in all Canadian provinces, universities in Ontario are publically-funded autonomous institutions. Individual institutions are governed by a board of governors which is responsible for corporate affairs and a senate, responsible for academic affairs. This system of governance that was established in 1906 under the University of Toronto Act (Jones 1998; Jones *et al.* 2004). While they may be officially the responsibility of the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD 2016), universities in the province enjoy a large degree of operational autonomy. Indeed, in 1966, former Premier Bill Davis (then minister of education) stated “the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the

provincially assisted universities of Ontario is equivalent to, if not greater than, that known by publicly supported universities anywhere". He goes on to say that "we should undoubtedly be better off if they were allowed to continue to operate with such autonomy." (Cooper *et al.* 1966, 33). From the 1970s into the 1990s, the balance between university autonomy and centralized administration shifted back and forth but ultimately, according to a report by the Ministry, "autonomy for universities prevailed, and the universities were never 'centrally planned'." (MET 1996, 2). The notion that Canadian universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy is supported by many others, including Glen Jones, who states that "Canadian universities continue to exercise a relatively high level of autonomy in terms of their internal affairs." (Jones 1998, 10).

The implication of institutional autonomy is very important for the current report, as it has caused government policy interventions in university affairs to become a contentious issue. A recent example of this dynamic can be observed after the release of a 2012 report by the Ministry entitled "Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge". In this report, the Ministry made numerous recommendations including requiring the universities offer more 3-year labour market-focused degrees, making core first-year course credits fully transferable across all institutions in the province, and significantly expanding the availability of online courses (MTCU 2012). Appreciable resistance to this report was encountered with the Canadian Association of University Teachers stating "This is the most serious attack on post-secondary education of which we are aware in Canada" as the government sought to "centralize control" over universities in the province (CAUT 2012). There was also pushback from university

administrations. For example, while the University of Toronto administration was receptive to many aspects of the report, they rejected the idea that shifting to more 3-year degrees would be beneficial to students and insisted that they would continue to evaluate transfer credits on a case-by-case basis (UoT, 2012). A particularly telling quote from their response is “In Alberta and British Columbia, credit transfer systems are based on inter-institutional agreements, not government fiat”, suggesting a rejection of the notion that these credit-transfer agreements should be mandated by government.

This brings us to the key governance challenge to be addressed in the following section; how can the provincial government best advance a policy of increasing WIL program offerings at universities across the province? While there may be clear benefits to offering more WIL opportunities, if university administrators perceive that the programs will increase administrative burdens (which they almost certainly will), or that the government is infringing on university autonomy by mandating policies, university pushback could be significant and limit the success of the policy. We will address this problem in following section, ultimately making recommendations for how the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development could best implement a policy program aimed at developing WIL opportunities at universities across the province.

## **V - Moving forward with WIL in Ontario: Policy program options**

In this section, we will make recommendations for the optimal policy program aimed at increasing the availability of WIL opportunities at universities in Ontario. From the

research presented in this report, we have identified three main challenges that must be addressed for a policy program to be successful.

1. Institutional autonomy may cause relatively active policies to be considered invasive by university administrations.
2. The current WIL landscape in Ontario is very heterogeneous, including number and types of programs, the language used to describe programs, and where the programs are housed within universities.
3. Implementation of WIL programs is costly.

***Institutional autonomy:*** Based on the research presented in this report, it is recommended that any policy program implemented by the Ministry should limit the direct involvement of government and should avoid using mandates to force institutions to act. This is likely to result in significant pushback by universities as they sense their autonomy being infringed upon. This was the experience in the State Universities of New York (SUNY) system, where a governor-sponsored mandate to increase offerings of WIL opportunities at state-run universities was met with considerable opposition from (Skelding 2015; UUP 2015; Moloney 2015). It should also be noted that the SUNY governance model is noticeably less autonomous than Ontario's which suggests that Ontario could expect comparable, if not greater opposition to a government-mandated policy program (SUNY 2016a). We therefore recommend that the responsibility for developing WIL programs be

housed at the institutional level, and that the government's role should be to encourage development, not mandate it. SUNY eventually did experience success by watering down the mandate and simply requiring all institutions in the system to perform an internal audit of their WIL opportunities; taking stock of their current programs and estimating the costs of scaling them up. We suggest that the Ministry could take a similar approach. By mandating an internal audit, institutions will be forced to consider the quantity and quality of their WIL programs as they have never been required to do in the past. Furthermore, it will allow the ministry to gain a better understanding of the costs that will be required to scale-up WIL programming. Finally, if the reports generated from the audits and made public, it may encourage institutions to improve their programming on their own accord so that they do not appear inferior to other institutions. When SUNY implemented this policy, results were positive and following the audits, some institutions quickly moved forward with making WIL a graduation requirement for students (Cobbleskill 2016). We believe that similar positive results would be observed in Ontario due to the similarities of the SUNY and Ontario university systems.

While we stress the importance of respecting the autonomy of universities in the province, it should also be noted that our scan of WIL opportunities presented in table 1 revealed that individual academic departments also often have significant freedom to design and implement their own internship programs. This freedom should be respected, as academic departments can best determine appropriate learning outcomes for their students and ensure that industry partners can help students arrive at those outcomes. An excellent example of this is Carleton University's computer science department which has

established a strong working relationship with the local business Shopify (Carleton 2016). A policy requiring all WIL opportunities to be organized through a central institutional body may miss opportunities such as this that only departments knowledgeable in their own field can identify.

**Program heterogeneity:** A second problem that is readily apparent is the heterogeneity of the current WIL environment in Ontario's university sector. This includes heterogeneity in the type and quantity of WIL opportunities offered and the language used to describe these opportunities across institutions. We therefore recommend that the policy encourage the development of a more consistent WIL landscape. To achieve this, we recommend establishing a centralized, non-governmental body that will allow individual institutions to better communicate WIL ideas, explore what programs other institutions are offering and standardize the language used to describe WIL opportunities (according to a typology, like that presented in table 1). We also recommend that this information be made available to students so that they can explore the WIL opportunities of all Ontario universities in one convenient location. We have identified two organizations that can act as models for this proposed body.

- *SUNY applied learning initiative:* The SUNY applied learning initiative has one convenient website, designed for student use, that allows students to compare the WIL opportunities offered at all institutions within the system (SUNY 2015). It also presents a clear typology of the different types of programs offered in the system and provides direct links to each individual institutions WIL office. Finally, this

initiative hosts an annual WIL conference, attended by delegates from most of SUNY's 64 campuses, where institutions can share their knowledge of WIL program best practices (SUNY 2016b). Overall, this contributes to an environment that is conducive to developing WIL programs.

- *Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT)*: ONCAT is an arm's-length non-profit organization that was established in response to the "Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge" report that was described earlier in this report. It is funded by the Ontario government, but its governing body is made up of primarily university administrators (ONCAT 2016a). It acts separately from the government with the goal simplifying student transfer between universities and acting as a hub where individual institutions can compare equivalent courses at other institutions and judge if the credit should be transferable. Institutional membership is optional, but all 45 of Ontario's publicly funded institutions have joined (Trick 2013). Like the SUNY applied learning initiative, it provides a single website where students and institutions can explore credit transfer options. It also hosts an annual conference concerning advances in credit transfer policy which delegates from all institutions are encouraged to attend (ONCAT 2016b). It has been crucial in advancing the ministry's goal of simplifying credit transfer between institutions and, importantly, has done so without mandating that institutions join or act in any way. It has facilitated the transition toward a more student-mobile university system simply by offering a platform for institutions and students to explore credit transfer options.

We recommend that the ministry consider establishing an organization similar to ONCAT or the SUNY applied learning initiative with a focus on improving WIL opportunities in the province. This body should use a single website to act as a platform where students and institutions alike can explore the WIL opportunities available throughout the university system. Membership to this body should be optional to respect institutional autonomy, and the governing body should consist primarily of university administrators. Finally, we recommend that this body host an annual conference to promote the exchange of knowledge concerning WIL best practices. Our research suggests that this approach will both respect institutional autonomy and promote a more organic development of the WIL sector.

**Cost:** Interviews with previous senior administration officials from both Carleton University and the University of Toronto revealed the importance of providing financial incentive to institutions if the program was to be successfully implemented. We believe that this is the area where the Ministry can play the greatest role in directly implementing a WIL-focused policy program. Fortunately, the current provincial funding model for post-secondary education in Ontario already provides two identifiable mechanisms that can be used to target funding towards encouraging institutional development of WIL programs.

- *Basic Income Units:* The first feature of the funding model that could be used to the Ministry's advantage is the basic income units (BIU) funding framework. Through this framework, universities receive government funding based on their enrollment numbers. However, students enrolled in higher-cost programs (engineering, for

example) are assigned higher levels of BIUs and institutions therefore receive more funding for those students (MTCU, 2009). Currently, students in co-op programs are not assigned more BIUs than non co-op students, and institutions are therefore left to cover the administrative costs associated with enrolling co-op students. Should the Ministry assign co-op students a higher BIU value, this may encourage institutions to offer more co-op spaces as the funding model would now account for the increased administrative costs associated with these students.

- *Special Purpose Grants:* The other area where the funding model could be used to incentivize the development of WIL programs is through the special purpose grants and performance funding portions of the funding model. While the majority of government funds are distributed based on enrollment numbers, approximately 10% of funds are distributed specifically to fund special projects and to institutions that meet their performance benchmarks (HEQCO 2016). This portion of the funding is used to drive specific government policy priorities and in the past has been used to fund the ministry's credit-transfer initiative, university differentiation programs, and bilingual/francophone programming (MTCU 20150). We propose that these funds could be used to specifically target institutional projects aimed at developing WIL opportunities, or sector-wide government initiatives like the centralized WIL body proposed earlier.

In summary, we recommend that the following steps be taken to ensure the success of the policy program:

1. Institutional autonomy should be respected and responsibility for developing WIL initiatives must ultimately lie at the institutional level. Government mandates should be limited to requiring an internal institutional audit of current WIL programs and opportunities for expansion of these programs.
2. The proposed policy program should seek to develop a culture within the university sector that is more favorable to the development of WIL programs. To accomplish this, we recommend establishing an arm's-length body, similar to ONCAT, which would simplify and coordinate the language surrounding WIL, host annual conferences to promote WIL best-practices, and act as a central hub for students to explore all institutions' WIL opportunities.
3. The current design of the post-secondary education funding model offers two mechanisms to develop WIL programs, including the BIU framework and special purpose grants. We recommend that the ministry use these pre-existing mechanisms to cover the costs associated with implementing this policy program.

## **Conclusion**

As students increasingly pursue post-secondary education for the advantages it provides in securing employment, governments should begin asking themselves if universities can do more to help prepare students for their careers. By offering more work-integrated learning opportunities to students, we believe that universities in Ontario can

help students develop the skills required to succeed in the workforce. While the advantages to these opportunities are clear, there are costs and institutional barriers that make it difficult for the provincial government to encourage their development. In this report, we have outlined the challenges associated with implementing a policy aimed at developing work-integrated learning programs in universities province-wide, including financial costs and institutional autonomy, and offered recommendations for how these challenges can be overcome. We believe that, if followed, these recommendations can ensure that a policy aimed at developing WIL opportunities in Ontario will be successful and be beneficial to both students and universities.

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