

From Learning to Labour Market: The State of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in Ontario

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June 2026



Funded by

Ontario





1. The Foundations of Work Integrated Learning

Across Ontario, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is becoming one of the most important bridges between education and employment. As technologies shift, industries evolve, and learners seek clearer pathways into meaningful careers, WIL has become a powerful tool for connecting classroom learning to real world applications. But it is more than a placement, internship, or project. WIL is shaped by the players: students, postsecondary institutions, employers, governments, and conveners who work together to create meaningful, quality learning experiences that expand into knowledge, skill, and labour transfer from postsecondary institutions (PSI) to industry.

This publication explores the state of WIL in Ontario. We begin with the big picture: what WIL is, why it matters, how the ecosystem works, and propose a Hierarchy of Needs of the players in this sector that can help us understand the pressures and priorities shaping the system today. Taken together, this article moves from shared definitions to system pressures, to on-the-ground responses, and finally toward what a more resilient and inclusive future for WIL might include.

Early efforts to deliver WIL at scale have faced familiar challenges: uneven employer participation (especially among SMEs), administrative burden and unclear front doors, misaligned timelines between academic terms and business needs, variable definitions of quality, and persistent inequities in who can access paid, mentored experiences. To connect these challenges to practical action, we propose a Hierarchy of Needs for key WIL players and use it as a lens to examine how four Ontario postsecondary institutions are responding, what they are building, which needs those approaches address, and where common friction points remain. The sections that follow are designed to make the throughline explicit: from system pressures, to underlying needs, to field-tested institutional and employer responses you can borrow and adapt.

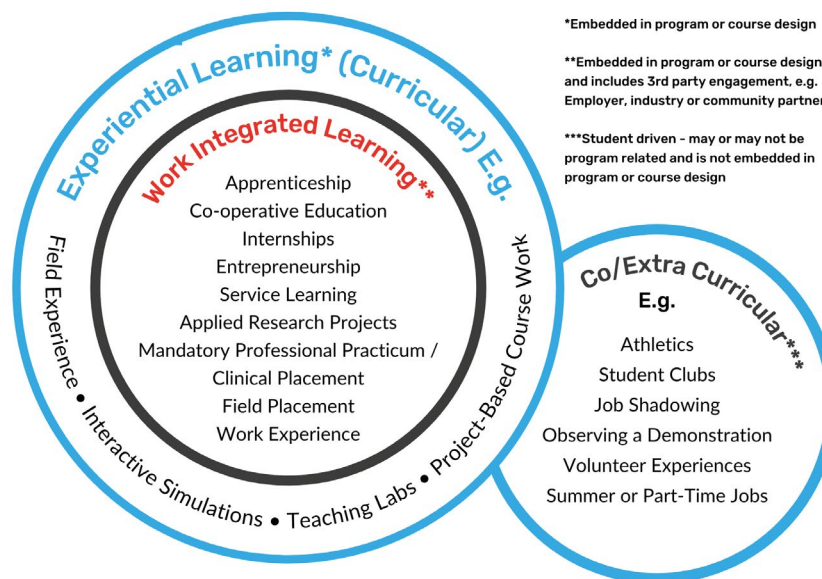
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What is WIL and Who Is Talking About It

CEWIL Canada defines WIL as:

“A form of curricular experiential education that formally integrates a student’s academic studies with quality experiences within a workplace or practice setting... involving an engaged partnership between an academic institution, a host organisation, and a student.” (CEWIL Canada 2021).



What is Work Integrated Learning (WIL)? [Image by CEWIL.](#)

This definition highlights three essential points:

1. **WIL is curricular:** it works best when it is intentionally positioned, not incidental.
2. **It is co-created:** by institutions, employers, students, government and convenors.
3. **Quality matters:** successful WIL must support learning outcomes, reflection, and assessment, all of which must be intentionally designed.

The ecosystem around WIL is active and growing. Bodies such as CEWIL Canada, BHER, ICTC, regional networks, and sector specific groups continue to research, evaluate, and advocate for effective WIL models. These organisations consistently identify WIL as a mechanism for scaling innovation, reducing

skills mismatches, and helping young people access meaningful careers. As a sector convenor, eCampusOntario works across these conversations as an enabling partner, agnostic to WIL type and focused on helping institutions, employers, and intermediaries collaborate in ways that expand the range of WIL options available. We see WIL as part of the solution to strengthening Canadian innovation, productivity, and labour market resiliency, particularly when programs reduce friction for employers and increase equitable access for learners. This is also why we collaborate with partners on accessible and capacity-building WIL: ensuring that work-integrated opportunities are designed so more learners can participate and more employers can benefit from diverse talent.

Why WIL Matters

WIL has become essential to workforce development in Canada, strengthening the talent pipeline and deepening collaboration. According to the Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER), WIL projects are most successful when they are embedded into the long-term operations of employers and institutions, becoming part of their talent development and innovation pathway infrastructure ([Business + Higher Education Roundtable 2025](#)).

WIL matters because:

- **Students** gain experience that turns tacit abilities into explicit, demonstrable skills.
- **Employers**, access talent, fresh ideas, and innovation capacity.
- **Postsecondary institutions** build stronger academic-industry connections that enhance curriculum and research.
- **Governments and funders** support pathways that strengthen employment outcomes, productivity, and national innovation capacity.

Over the past decade, funding programs across the sector have played a major role in scaling WIL in Canada. The current funding landscape includes many programs. The Student Work Placement Program (SWPP) ([Government of Canada 2023](#)), which provides wage subsidies for employers hiring PSE students. The Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL)'s WIL Innovation and VIRTEX grants ([CEWIL Canada 2026](#)) supporting PSE WIL programs. Mitacs Accelerate ([Mitacs 2026a](#)) offers \$15,000 in funding for research-based internships community partnerships. Mitacs Business Strategy Internship which provides \$10-15,000 for innovation-focused capacity increasing business projects. Or the Ontario Cooperative Education Tax Credit ([Government of Ontario 2022](#)) that refunds up to \$3000 in eligible student hiring expenses. These programs can help reduce financial barriers and enable employers (especially resource constrained SMEs) to host students.

eCampusOntario is supporting and scaling WIL across higher education with the following partners to grow access to and design high quality WIL experiences through the following initiatives and more:

- **ICTC** and **Magnet** to streamline access to SWPP funding for SMEs hiring work-integrated learning students at our Ontario member institutions. Eligible businesses may receive 50% (up to \$5,000) in wage subsidies to reduce the cost of hiring and test-driving new skills.
- **Tech-Access** Canada to expand innovation-focused, curricular work-integrated learning opportunities by connecting SMEs with Tech Access Centres and faculty-led student teams at post-secondary institutions across the country.
- **BHER** to co-create accessible, practical tools and resources that help bridge the employment gap for youth with disabilities by translating lived experiences and disability-informed strengths into workplace-recognized skills.
- **Mitacs** to strengthen connections and opportunities between post-secondary education institutions, students, and businesses through joint initiatives that support research partnerships and ecosystem referral pathways.
- **Riipen** to support **Advance Ontario** aligned Work Integrated Learning initiatives, enabling funded, project based placements that connect Ontario postsecondary learners with real-world industry projects, particularly among small and medium sized enterprises.
- Since 2019, eCampusOntario's Le Consortium d'apprentissage expérientiel francophone de l'Ontario (**CAPFO**), has advanced experiential and work-integrated learning by facilitating access to high-quality French language and bilingual opportunities for Ontario learners, including placements delivered via the Riipen platform, while providing bilingual resources, and targeted employer engagement support (2354 student experiences supported, 1534 employers supported, 50 educators supported).

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Who Is Involved and What Matters to Them

The WIL system is built on interconnected roles. ICTC’s national research describes the core players succinctly (ICTC CTIC 2025):

- **Postsecondary Institutions (PSIs)** deliver curriculum, assure quality, and build trusted relationships with employers.
- **Students** seek paid, mentored experience that leads to employment and career clarity.
- **Employers** need quick access to the right skills, low friction onboarding, and real value from student contributions.
- **Funders and governments** aim to reduce unemployment, strengthen innovation capacity, and accelerate pathways from research to market.
- **Convenors**, like eCampusOntario, BHER, Future Skills Centre and others, help surface PSI offerings, connect employers, standardize quality, and reduce the administrative burden on all sides.

Each player has distinct needs, pressures, and incentives which influence how WIL is designed, delivered, and experienced.

A Hierarchy of Needs for the WIL Ecosystem

A hierarchy of needs helps us understand the interconnected priorities, constraints, and influences shaping the WIL system. This framing is not meant to flatten differences across institutions or employers, but to surface where unmet needs create friction today and where thoughtful design could unlock future capacity. By mapping what each stakeholder requires to succeed, we can better identify innovation opportunities, design better solutions, and focus our efforts on the areas that matter most.

Here is the Hierarchy of Needs we developed for Ontario’s WIL players:

Hierarchy of Needs & Influence in the WIL Ecosystem

Player	Highest Needs	Other needs
Funders (e.g. Government)	Lower unemployment; Develop stronger national innovation capacity and sovereignty.	Move research toward commercialization; Align opportunities to labour market demands and timing (e.g. create incentives like funding or policy changes, ISED streams, SWPP); Be transparent with rules and processes.
Institutions (PSIs)	Bridge programs and research outputs to labour market outcomes; secure sustainable WIL partnerships; achieve 100% placement targets where program requires.	Align postings to program learning outcomes; share opportunities equitably; facilitate communication and match between engaged employers and students; help students achieve a good WIL experience.
Students	Convert experience into interviews, offers, and career clarity.	Gain exposure to industry; turn tacit skills into explicit competencies; build a mentor supported network preferentially through paid WIL.

Player	Highest Needs	Other needs
Employers	Quick access to skills and labour; Build a talent pipeline; integrate student talent and PSI knowledge into innovation and growth and company sustainability.	Support students to contribute to the business's needs; Simple wayfinding to connect with compatible PSI programs (especially for SMEs); Trust in quality and match of student to work.
Convenors (such as BHER, CEWIL, eCampusOntario and peers)	Reduce duplicating efforts across institutions and employers by scaling and sharing best practices; Create and offer thought leadership and aggregation of tools, standards, and supports such as templates for scoping, mentoring, and assessment.	Act as the nexus that brings people, ideas, and resources together to broaden opportunities.

Understanding these layers supports better decision making. It can reveal friction points (e.g., administrative load, timing mismatches, uneven access to opportunities), but also opportunities, especially where convenors and funders can reduce transaction costs and lift quality systemwide.

Power and Influence in Context

Each player in the WIL ecosystem has influence, but not always in the places they most feel pressure.

- **Students** carry the least formal power, yet WIL experiences disproportionately impact their life outcomes, and they are a very important vector for the knowledge and innovation transfer and generation.
- **Employers (especially SMEs)** shape much of the nature of the WIL ecosystem. While large companies often have established processes, resources, and dedicated teams that facilitate alignment with the postsecondary schedule, SMEs account for about 99.6% of businesses in Canada (2023 data) ([Government of Canada 2026a](#)). SMEs represent a huge source of potential and innovation in WIL. Although they offer meaningful and high-impact learning opportunities for students, many SMEs face challenges related to access due to

administrative capacity, and the limited time and resources needed to participate in WIL programs. Consequently, their limited ability to participate fully is not due to a lack of interest, but to structural barriers that policymakers and partners can help overcome.

- **PSIs** are responsible for student experience, and curricular integrity, but rely on employers and funders for opportunity.
- **Funders** shape the system strongly through incentives and timing yet rarely interact directly with students or day-to-day WIL operations.
- **Convenors** sit in a unique position, with visibility across institutions and employers, but rely heavily on collaboration to enact change.

Recognizing these interdependencies helps us build WIL systems that are not only larger, but more equitable, sustainable, and impactful.

Our interviews revealed that unlocking these SME connections is a potential key to strengthening the WIL ecosystem. The next sections in this article explore how postsecondary institutions and employers are responding to these constraints today, and what these patterns suggest about how WIL will need to evolve next. With this hierarchy as a lens, we turned to postsecondary institutions to understand how these needs are being addressed in practice, under real staffing, funding, and policy constraints.

2. What Ontario PSIs Are Doing: Field-tested Approaches in Work-Integrated Learning

To develop this section on WIL and PSIs, we started with a series of four structured conversations with WIL leaders at Ontario postsecondary institutions and have since continued our conversations. We chose to highlight the different ways postsecondary institutions are responding to WIL needs and to create a welcoming starting point that encourages others across the sector to contribute their own stories, challenges, and innovations and so readers can see how those pressures translate into institutional design choices.

After gathering their insights, we analysed the themes through the lens of the WIL Hierarchy of Needs, aligning institutional practices with the underlying needs those practices address. This approach allowed us to compare diverse strategies across institutions while highlighting common patterns, sector wide challenges, and opportunities for shared learning.

	Highest Needs	Other needs
Institutions (PSIs)	Bridge programs and research outputs to labour market outcomes; secure sustainable WIL partnerships; achieve 100% placement targets where program requires	Align postings to program learning outcomes; share opportunities equitably; facilitate communication and match between engaged employers and students; help students achieve a good WIL experience

What PSIs told us: the solutions in practice they are using to address WIL needs

Institutions are tackling WIL needs in many ways, modulated by staffing strategies and financial constraints. Please think of this as an idea catalogue of field-tested strategies to spark further sharing. We recognize that WIL is experienced very differently across institution types, regions, languages, and governance models; while this snapshot reflects common patterns, it does not presume a single path will work equally well for Indigenous institutes, Francophone institutions, smaller colleges, or research-intensive universities.

1) Program Learning Outcome aligned matching at scale.

Several institutions are simplifying the front door for employers and safeguarding curricular integrity. We heard from a university that is merging multiple job boards into a single streamlined system, building a central employer engagement team, and tagging postings by industry cluster so the right programmes and learning outcomes surface automatically. Another college is on a similar path, using the same streamlined job board across co-op/work term boards and adding an experiential module for field placements. Opportunities are tagged by program type and released on a term cadence. Another university has a recruitment platform that supports both direct matching and general visibility postings, accommodating employers who need curated shortlists and those who want to broadcast opportunities.

2) Sustaining partnerships amid austerity.

One member university shared about their deep investments in partnership infrastructure: approximately 30 staff in opportunity development, two Student Work Placement Program (SWPP) specialists, and monthly funding webinars/showcases, backed by an external resource manager who keeps funding options visible to employers. That combination helps to steady relationships when markets shift. Another university centralized employer engagement to similarly reduce friction for partners across faculties. At the same time to achieve the sustainability of partnerships, a college shared that they found clear term windows and large programme mix kept employer pipelines active, while another college deliberately rebuilt new business development contacts and phased outreach plans by term to maintain connection to employers and ensure evergreen WIL opportunities.

3) Funding and timing: making SWPP work for everyone.

All four institutions are actively sharing SWPP information with employers. One university layers this with [multiple SWPP delivery partners](#) to match streams to roles and to amplify equity linked incentives. Another university assigns specialists to SWPP and has its Business Development team help employers submit paperwork on time, which improves uptake and compliance. A college shared that they provide confirmation letters while keeping the application step on the employer side lightweight. Another college flagged two practical hurdles: international student ineligibility in many SWPP streams and lower employer follow through when they must return to validate details, both of which to be aware of as these can depress conversion.

4) Safety, screening, and clarity about what “counts” as WIL.

A college notes that paid roles are easier to approve because health and safety insurance is handled via employer payroll, underscoring the value of clear

criteria and templates. To ensure that a certain WIL can be used within a student’s credential, or “counts”, another college ensured structured windows and tagging to help ensure roles stay within programme intent and timing.

5) Equity and multiple entry points for students.

One of our contact universities addresses EDDI by pairing equity priority SWPP variants with targeted employer outreach, aiming to broaden access to paid experiences for diverse student groups. Another university has developed a suite of services to address multiple kinds of WIL and create different onramps for students at various stages and in different disciplines, while anchoring experiences to academic development.

6) Lowering employer friction (payroll, readiness, documentation).

To increase the ease of employer involvement a university business development team walks employers through documentation, synchronising funding timelines with academic cycles. A member college noted that payroll-ready roles move more quickly from accrual to active student work, highlighting the value of readiness checklists that help PSIs and employers work together more seamlessly. And another university shared they employ a single point of contact and consolidating job board to create a streamlined workflow reducing the time new employers spent figuring out “where to start.”

What you can borrow from these examples for scaling and strengthening WIL:

- **Consolidate the front door** for employers (one form, program tags, clear timelines).
- **Name dedicated roles and regular interactions** for funding navigation (SWPP “shepherds,” monthly funding briefings).

- **Publish approval criteria** (credit status, Health & Safety, supervision) and provide a WIL host readiness checklist to speed decisions.
- **Offer students multiple on-ramps** tied to curriculum: short projects, first term experiences, and longer co-ops.

3. SMEs and Work-Integrated Learning: Meeting Business Needs Where They Are

In Ontario, small and medium sized enterprises are the backbone of the economy. SMEs account for nearly two-thirds of private-sector employment and generate approximately half of the province's business-sector GDP, making them central to growth, productivity, and regional resilience, not a marginal segment of the labour market ([Government of Canada 2026b](#); [Tam, Shivani & Johnston 2024](#); [Government of Ontario 2026](#)). Alongside these economic contributions, SMEs also have access to federal supports through the Innovation Canada platform, which offers tailored funding recommendations, advisory services, and tools that help businesses identify programs aligned with their growth stage and operational needs ([Government of Canada 2026c](#); [Government of Canada 2026d](#)).

At the same time, postsecondary institutions (PSIs) hold deep reservoirs of student talent, applied knowledge, and research capacity that SMEs often need but cannot easily access on their own, especially when navigating rapid change, constrained resources, or pressure to innovate.

And yet, a familiar dilemma persists. For PSIs, engaging a large corporation is often efficient: one relationship, one legal team, one HR process, and potentially dozens of placements. In a context of austerity, fewer staff, and sustained pressure to deliver WIL opportunities at scale, this route can feel like the path of least resistance.

For SMEs, navigating postsecondary systems can feel opaque, time consuming, and risky, particularly when payroll is not yet in place, supervision capacity is thin, or the value of student contributions feels uncertain relative to the effort required to onboard and mentor them.

The result is not a lack of shared interest. Where the opportunities exist, it is fundamentally, a coordination problem, one where the economic importance of SMEs far outpaces the system's ability to consistently meet them where they are.

This is where eCampusOntario's role as a sector convener is most practical: reducing the transaction costs that keep employers, especially SMEs, from engaging, and helping employers and institutions identify a right-sized first step. Rather than relying on a single front door, we have been experimenting across the WIL landscape through initiatives such as ONJob1, working with partners and platforms to test low-friction pathways for employers, strengthen referral routes, and surface what makes participation easier at different stages of readiness. In parallel, OCIP.ai provides a hub where SMEs can identify upskilling opportunities for existing staff and connect with partners and student teams to advance innovation needs, turning "interest in WIL" into an actionable set of options that better match timelines and capacity. In other words, meeting SMEs where they are is not only a design principle for WIL models; it is also a coordination challenge that can be addressed with shared infrastructure and intermediaries that make it easier to start, learn, and scale.

The Employers hierarchy of needs

In the first section, we proposed a hierarchy of needs for Employers, including SMEs, engaged in WIL:

	Highest needs	Other needs
Employers	Quick access to skills and labour; Build a talent pipeline; integrate student talent and PSI knowledge into innovation and growth and company sustainability	Support students to contribute to the business's needs; Simple wayfinding to connect with compatible PSI programs (especially for SMEs); Trust in quality and match of student to work

The key insight that has surfaced repeatedly, across conversations with both PSIs and employers, is that SMEs do not experience these needs all at once. They surface differently depending on where a business is in its development, operations, and hiring lifecycle.

A pre-payroll business struggling to unblock a process bottleneck is not looking for the same thing as a payroll-ready employer trying to systematize hiring. Both can benefit from working with PSIs, but not through the same models.

From “Are you ready?” to “What fits right now?”

Too often, conversations about WIL implicitly ask SMEs, “Are you ready to take a student?”

A more productive question might be, “Which kind of partnership would actually help you right now?”

- This reframing is important because:
- Not all collaboration needs to start with formal employment.
- Payroll readiness changes what is easy, not what is possible.

Value and trust are built through appropriately scoped engagement.

To support this shift, below is a short diagnostic designed to help SMEs (and PSI staff working with them) quickly identify where partnering with postsecondary institutions and for what kinds of WIL might be most helpful. These questions could serve as a wayfinding tool, linking business realities to engagement formats that align with SME needs and capacity.



#	Yes / No Question	If Yes, this suggests...	If No, this suggests...
1	Do you currently have payroll set up and have you hired at least one employee in the past?	Organization is structurally ready to host paid students (interns or coop students).	Organization is pre-payroll or very early stage; employment-based WIL may create friction.
		Potential PSI Engagement Path:	Potential PSI Engagement Path:
		Internships, coops, applied research	Course based projects, microplacements, consulting sprints
2	In the next 6–12 months, do you expect to need additional capacity or new skills beyond your current staff?	There is a real business demand students could help address.	Engagement may be exploratory rather than capacity driven.
		Potential PSI Engagement Path:	Potential PSI Engagement Path:
		Skill aligned student roles or projects	Light touch engagement (events, challenges, discovery projects)
3	Is there someone in your organization who could spend 1–2 hours per week guiding a student or project team?	The organization can provide the supervision needed for meaningful student work.	Limited supervisory capacity; high risk of overload or poor experience.
		Potential PSI Engagement Path:	Potential PSI Engagement Path:
		Placements, coops, defined projects	Highly structured, short-term projects with external facilitation
4	Do you have a clearly defined challenge or opportunity that could benefit from student or research input?	Student work is likely to generate visible value and ROI.	Scope may need codesign support to avoid misalignment.
		Potential PSI Engagement Path:	Potential PSI Engagement Path:
		Targeted projects, applied research, capstones	Problem framing support, exploratory projects
5	Have you previously worked with a postsecondary institution (students, research, or training)?	Familiarity with academic timelines and expectations; lower onboarding friction.	First time collaborator; will need more guidance and scaffolding.
		Potential PSI Engagement Path:	Potential PSI Engagement Path:
		Scale or deepen successful engagement types	Entry level formats with templates and active support
6	Would you be open to a short-term engagement (2–8 weeks) to test collaboration before committing longer-term?	Openness to low-risk experimentation and incremental adoption.	May be seeking immediate long-term hires or outcomes.
		Potential PSI Engagement Path:	Potential PSI Engagement Path:
		Potential PSI Engagement Path Micro-placements, course projects	Potential PSI Engagement Path Longer placements, internships, or research partnerships
7	Would you like help navigating programs, platforms, or contacts that match your needs?	The organization is ready to be matched and supported by intermediaries.	The organization may prefer self-serve or direct recruitment.
		Potential PSI Engagement Path:	Potential PSI Engagement Path:
		Facilitated matching (WIL office, platforms, partnerships)	Direct posting or informal engagement

Taken together, the questions ask about:

- **Structural readiness** (including payroll and supervision capacity),
- **Business demand** (skills, capacity, defined challenges),
- **Prior experience and risk tolerance**, and
- **Desire for navigation and support.**

What matters is not any single answer, but the pattern they reveal.

Some SMEs emerge as clearly ready for coops, internships, or applied research partnerships that build long-term talent pipelines and embed PSI knowledge into ongoing work. Others surface as strong candidates for short, project-based engagement that delivers immediate value while lowering onboarding friction and building confidence on both sides.

Both pathways matter. Both meet different layers of the SME hierarchy of needs. And both create conditions for deeper collaboration over time.



4. Why this WIL conversation matters now

From a system perspective, this framing opens capacity where it often feels constrained. These insights also point beyond immediate solutions, toward system design choices that will shape the future of WIL in Ontario and beyond.

For PSIs, it suggests ways to broaden employer engagement without requiring every SME to look like a large firm. Project based, course embedded, and short-term models are not “lesser” forms of WIL, they are often the onramps that make later placements viable and as a relationship building foundation.

For SMEs, it clarifies that partnering with postsecondary institutions is not an all-or-nothing commitment. There are credible entry points that respect time, resources, and uncertainty, while still delivering real value.

For students, it expands the universe of meaningful experiences, especially in SMEs, where mentorship, breadth of exposure, and direct impact are often strongest.

Looking ahead: The Future of WIL

These insights point toward a future where WIL succeeds not by asking employers and institutions to adapt to rigid systems, but by building systems that adapt to real contexts.

A mature WIL ecosystem needs to:

- Lead with talent needs,
- Offer multiple, right-sized engagement formats,
- Provide credible navigation and transparent communication between players,
- And recognize employer support and relationship building as strategic infrastructure.

Taken together, the opportunity is significant: better matching, lower friction, and partnerships that meet SMEs where they are, while still supporting the long-term goals of talent development and innovation that underpin WIL.

What We Haven't Captured Yet, and How This Work Grows and is Built Together

We treat equity, diversity, decolonization, and inclusion not as an add on to WIL design, but as core elements that shape whether systems work at all, particularly in early prototypes like the one presented here.

The insights in this article reflect early conversations with postsecondary institutions and employers and students across Ontario, with a strong representation from urban institutions. Broadening whose realities inform this work is not only about representation, but also essential for stress testing whether proposed WIL pathways are truly adaptable, equitable, and durable across contexts.

This work is ongoing, and we encourage all who wish to contribute or comment to reach out to us at research@ecampusontario.ca

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