

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORKFORCE

OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

A highly-skilled workforce is contingent on students being prepared with the skills employers are looking for. Ensuring that students have the proper skills to succeed after graduation is a growing priority for both students and employers, yet not all students have the same opportunities and students are ill-prepared to articulate their skills to potential employers, making it difficult for them to gain meaningful employment.

SUMMARY

The benefits of work-integrated learning (WIL) are clear: Students benefit from experience that prepares them for the workforce and setting themselves up to earn more post-graduation. Employers benefit by having unique perspectives in the workplace and fostering a pool of potential employees to train and recruit from (one study found that a WIL program with 800 students can save employers up to \$1.37 million/year).¹ Society benefits from the strength of the skills students bring to their work and their ability to engage in work across sectors, creating positive outcomes for innovation, social impact, and economic growth and stability.

The provincial government should invest in the Career Ready Fund to incentivize employers to increase opportunities for disciplines and programs of study that currently lack WIL opportunities such as general arts and sciences.

While work-integrated learning has become a priority for students, universities, and employers, there are **limited WIL options available for students in general arts and science programs.**² This is due, in part, to employers' lack of infrastructure and resources to support WIL opportunities. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities already helps publicly-assisted colleges and universities, employers, and other organizations create experiential learning

opportunities for post-secondary students and recent grads to help transition them into the workforce through investments in the Career Ready Fund.³ By expanding these investments to include targeted incentives for employers to provide more WIL opportunities to students in general arts and science programs, the provincial government can continue its leadership in preparing students for the workforce, contributing to a strong workforce that will strengthen our economy.

The provincial government should task the Ministry of Colleges and Universities with establishing a best practice model that post-secondary institutions may follow, that outlines how to convey the academic, oral, practical, and writing skills acquired through post-secondary education and extracurriculars.

Expanding the approach to learning by incorporating effective WIL opportunities for all students will be ineffective if students are not adequately prepared to articulate the skills they are learning to potential employers.

Important skills, like communication, critical thinking, and teamwork, can be difficult to quantify, and students are graduating without knowledge of how to best articulate these skills as they enter the job market. If employers are not prepared to ask and look for these skills, qualified and experienced graduates may be unable to find work in their field. This hurts new graduates who may struggle as minimum wage earners while trying to pay off student debts, and society is hindered when highly-skilled workers are not able to contribute to their full potential.

¹ Peggy Sattler & Julie Peters, *Work-Integrated Learning and Post-Secondary Graduates: The Perspective of Ontario Employers* (Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2012).

² Peggy Sattler & Julie Peters, *Work-Integrated Learning and Post-Secondary Graduates: The Perspective of Ontario Employers* (Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2012); OUSA, *Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey 2017*, data forthcoming.

³ <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/programs/careerreadyfund.html>

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Targeted Investments in Career Ready Fund

The Career Ready Fund has contributed to strong employment rates among new grads across the province. For example, Brock University has recently expanded their experiential learning opportunities to reach 100% of academic programs using the Career Ready Fund, which they attribute to their above average employment rates for new grads - reaching 96% two years after graduating.⁴ Other projects with the purpose of connecting students and employers through experiential learning, including Riipen and the Propel Initiative, have used investments from the Career Ready Fund to support partnerships that benefit both students and business, community organizations, and the government.⁵

Ensuring students are career-ready upon graduation has clear benefits for our entire province, and WIL is a proven approach to this end. In a 2016 survey conducted by Abacus Data, 86% of student respondents who had WIL opportunities reported that they felt better prepared for the workforce because of their industry-specific knowledge and experience, compared to the 49% of students who did not receive WIL opportunities during their post-secondary education.⁶

It is important that investments that support WIL are addressing academic programs that typically do not have these opportunities so that all students are prepared for the workforce. Students in business, engineering, architecture and related technologies, and STEM programs are provided with more WIL opportunities than their peers in general arts and science-based programs. Yet, a majority of students are enrolled in general arts and science-based programs.⁷

The Career Ready Fund previously offered two streams of time-limited funding: one targeting Employer and Regional Partnerships, and a second creating a New Grad Career Bridge. A new stream should be developed that targets the creation of WIL opportunities for students in general arts and science programs.⁸

To do this, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Council of Ontario Universities on a targeted framework to create WIL opportunities for under-recognized programs, defining types of WIL opportunities appropriate for general arts and science programs, and focusing on how the skills students obtain in these programs can be utilized in the workplace in order to fill the needs of, and benefit, employers.

Skills Articulation

Post-secondary students must be able to articulate both their human skills and in-class skills to future employers. According to the RBC Future Skills Report, the top skills sought after across 300 occupations and 2.4 million expected job openings include critical thinking, coordination, social perceptiveness, active listening, and complex problem solving.⁹ With critical thinking and other foundational skills being at the forefront of what employers are looking for, the government must support students to better articulate these skills to employers.

Just as the provincial government has prioritized preparing students to be financially literate, they can also be a leader in ensuring students are given the tools to articulate the vast range of skills they have developed in all aspects of their post-secondary career. Establishing a best practice model for skills articulation will give universities the tools to ensure that students are conveying their value to potential employers, setting them up for success in the job market, and allowing their skills to strengthen business, innovation, and societal and economic growth.

⁴ <https://brocku.ca/brock-news/2019/07/career-launcher-this-fall-every-brock-program-will-have-an-experiential-option/>

⁵ <https://riipen.com/career-ready-fund/>; <https://propelinitiative.ca/about-us/>

⁶ Abacus Data, Work Integrated Learning and Post-Secondary Education: What Students Think (Ottawa, ON: Abacus Data, 2016).

⁷ Peggy Sattler & Julie Peters, Work-Integrated Learning and Post-Secondary Graduates: The Perspective of Ontario Employers (Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2012); OUSA, Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey 2017, data forthcoming.

⁸ <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/programs/careerreadyfund.html>

⁹ https://www.rbc.com/dms/enterprise/futurelaunch/_assets-custom/pdf/RBC-Future-Skills-Report-FINAL-Singles.pdf

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of over 150,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

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