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BHER provides this glimmer of light for people trying to do things that are slightly different or running against the stream.

– Post Secondary Institution Representative



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization that brings together Canada's largest companies and leading post-secondary education institutions (PSI). Since 2015, BHER has worked to harness the strengths of Canada's business and PSI sectors to build opportunities for young Canadians, boost innovation and drive collaboration.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is one of BHER's priorities. WIL provides opportunities for students to bridge the gap between classroom learning and the world of work by applying their skills in a practical setting. Since 2019, BHER has worked closely with the Government of Canada on their shared goal of ensuring 100% of Canada's post-secondary students have access to some form of WIL opportunity before they graduate.

With BHER's initial funding from Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) coming to an end in March 2022, BHER engaged Blueprint to assess the impact of their work on the WIL ecosystem since launching their WIL initiative in 2019. The evaluation answers questions regarding the relevance of BHER's WIL work, the extent to which it addresses gaps in the ecosystem, the effectiveness of its design and delivery, and the impact of the program on students, employers, PSIs, and the broader WIL ecosystem.

Evaluation Approach

Blueprint worked closely with BHER to develop a logic model, theory of change, and an evaluation framework. We implemented a mixed methods approach for the evaluation, including a document review, administrative data analysis, survey of employers that generated 70 responses, student focus groups, and 53 key informant interviews with employers, funded partners, BHER members, PSIs, government and BHER staff.¹

Context and Background

BHER's WIL program aims to address the disconnect between students who lack practical experience and the skills sought by employers, who struggle to recruit and retain talent. Recognizing the importance of WIL to address this gap, the federal government has committed over \$1.1 billion since 2015 to strengthen Canada's WIL ecosystem.

Research has shown that, for students, WIL leads to more successful transitions from higher education to the workplace and improved employment prospects. For employers, research has demonstrated that hosting WIL opportunities helps to recruit and retain students to fill skills gaps, helps employers gain access to innovative ideas and perspectives, increases productivity, and develops more diverse and inclusive teams. PSIs have been shown to benefit from more relevant course curricula, increased enrollment from students seeking programs with WIL opportunities, and improved reputation due to enhanced employability rates.

Despite these proven benefits of WIL, as of 2016, only 50% of university students and 65-70% of college/polytechnic students had participated in a WIL opportunity.² In 2019, the Government of Canada committed \$798.2 million over five years to create up to 84,000 new WIL opportunities through the Student Work Placement Program and BHER's WIL Partnerships program. BHER committed to the creation of 44,000 new WIL placements in the first three years, alongside stakeholder collaboration, partnership development, capacity building, research, and innovation to strengthen Canada's WIL ecosystems.

¹ Limitations of the evaluation include students' responses may not be representative of the diversity and experience of all students and the recent launch of the Resource Hub and establishment of 19 new partnerships during the evaluation limited the ability to determine its effectiveness.

² Academica Group. (2016). Taking the Pulse of Work-Integrated Learning in Canada. <https://www.bher.ca/sites/default/files/documents/2020-08/BHER-Academica-report-full.pdf>

Key Highlights from BHER's WIL Program to Date:



To date, BHER has provided **\$10.5 million** to support the development of WIL opportunities with **nearly 40,000 WIL opportunities** secured to date.

Through their work in the ecosystem, BHER has brought together over **150 partners** through **42 partnerships** between employers and post-secondary institutions.

Almost **33% of employers** had offered a WIL opportunity for the **first time**.

Almost **75% of employers** stated that WIL helped strengthen their talent pipeline, with **80% of employers** gaining access to resources to help fill a skill gap.

Over **75% of employers** gained **new skills and/or knowledge** from students as a result of the WIL opportunity.

Almost all employers will host the **same or more WIL opportunities** in the future.

Relevance to the Ecosystem

BHER’s efforts to advance WIL in the broader ecosystem are seen as relevant in four main ways.

<p>First,</p> <p>BHER has played a key role in elevating the importance of WIL and building momentum for national and provincial WIL expansion. BHER’s high profile and influential members are helping to elevate the profile of experiential learning and WIL for all stakeholders, while also elevating WIL within their own institutions and companies.</p>	<p>Second,</p> <p>BHER is viewed as a thought leader in the WIL space and has helped broaden the understanding of WIL among employers and stakeholders. This was primarily done through their support for innovative approaches and championing of emergent forms of WIL.</p>	<p>Third,</p> <p>BHER is providing funding to increase the numbers, support, and diversity of WIL opportunities, by strengthening the capacity of PSIs and employers. Funding has also been used to extend WIL opportunities to equity-seeking students, students living outside major city centres, international students, and to students in degree programs with fewer WIL opportunities.</p>	<p>Finally,</p> <p>respondents highly valued BHER’s role in strengthening engagement between employers and PSIs. For PSIs, BHER provides meaningful opportunities for engagement with the private sector to understand their needs and better prepare students for future workforce needs. For employers, BHER offers opportunities to engage with PSIs to create a more agile and responsive curricula and reducing training costs for employers by ensuring students are work ready.</p>
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Role in the Ecosystem

BHER is seen as playing a unique leadership role in the broader WIL ecosystem as a **convener of employers and PSIs.** BHER’s role in promoting the employer voice is regarded as critical, as this has traditionally been a significant gap in the WIL ecosystem.

BHER also provides a **non-partisan, national lens and leadership in the WIL ecosystem** and a welcomed ability to think nationally about expanding WIL opportunities and sharing learning and best practices across borders. Despite this, some stakeholders felt BHER had a Central Canada focus and encouraged stronger engagement, collaboration, and communication across provinces.

BHER is also making strong efforts to **advance collaboration in the ecosystem,** through both bilateral partnerships as well as broader collaboration opportunities. To date they have brought together over 150 partners to collaborate and explore way to advance WIL opportunities. Stakeholders encouraged BHER to continue to strengthen their role in the ecosystem through greater visibility of their work, strategic engagement with key ecosystem actors, and increased presence in networks where partners are active. Stakeholders also noted that competition and incentive structures are not always aligned for collaboration, a challenge which goes beyond BHER’s mandate to address.

“BHER is.... also a voice for large WIL stakeholders in Canada, such as large companies and universities and colleges – the most influential and important ones in Canada – in order to create discussion and momentum in this space.”

– Government Representative

Effectiveness of Delivery

Indirect Support: Research, Convening and Mobilization

BHER’s mandate includes strengthening the broader WIL ecosystem across Canada through research and development, convening, and data collection. BHER has published and co-published several research pieces related to skills development, the future of work and WIL. Recent reports have focused on the barriers and enablers to expanding WIL, particularly for SMEs and post-COVID. Findings have been used to shape BHER’s tools and resources. Stakeholders appreciated the insights that BHER has provided and encouraged this to continue.

BHER regularly **convenes** a variety of WIL ecosystem actors, though this has been more challenging during COVID. Stakeholders greatly appreciated the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of trends and changes in the labour market, to connect with other actors, and to gain a national perspective on WIL. BHER is encouraged to play a greater role in convening WIL actors nationally and regionally, and to ensure ensure they include WIL practitioners

Direct Support: Innovative WIL Opportunities, Securing Partners and Tools and Supports

Since 2020, BHER has provided funding and support to partners to secure nearly 40,000 new WIL opportunities. As part of this effort, BHER championed the expansion of WIL opportunities to include nine emerging forms. Employers viewed these lighter touch models as lower risk and more manageable. In fact, 63% of employers felt the funded partnerships **made the entire process easier** (e.g., recruitment, supervision, feedback) regardless of the form. Employers reported a greater awareness of the full range of WIL models and there is some indication that the expanded range of options was more accessible for employers, with 31% of employers hosting WIL opportunities for the first time. Many students and some funded partners felt **emerging models** were most relevant in the early years of

schooling for those navigating career choices and professional interests. Co-ops and internships were perceived to be more effective in the later years of schooling to facilitate relationships, connections, and networks in their transitions to work.

For emerging **WIL models to be meaningful**, students and employers agreed that three principles need to be achieved - student and employer needs must be aligned; the work completed needs to be meaningful to the organization; and an effective coaching and feedback system needs to be established including a process of self-reflection for students.

To date, BHER has identified WIL delivery partners through curated partnership development and an open call RFP process. Before March 2021, BHER’s partners committed to create 23,899 new WIL opportunities. Since March 2021, BHER has secured an additional 14,923 WIL opportunities.

“At that time, I was still an undisclosed major and I didn’t know what I wanted to study... I just wanted to try something new and gain experience in a different field and see where that led me... its about gaining exposure into a specific skillset in a short period of time, so its not a huge commitment, but you still get lots of valuable experience.”
– Student

Overall, BHER was recognized by funded partners as **flexible and responsive** to their needs.

Funded partners indicated that the timing of contracts could be improved to better align with the academic calendar. Regular check-ins with partners by BHER staff were considered valuable, especially for those partners with less experience providing WIL opportunities. BHER’s approach of connecting partners with similar models to share ideas and experiences was also appreciated.

BHER developed **tools and resources** to assist funded partners in implementing their program and **launched** its comprehensive **WIL Resource Hub** on November 19, 2021, with resources focused on exploring, investing in, and creating quality WIL.

In addition to engaging partners, BHER developed the Canada Comeback Challenge (C3) as an innovative response to COVID-19. From coast to coast, students collaborated to develop solutions to some of Canada’s most pressing challenges. This program helped replace WIL placements lost during the pandemic, engaging students in an accessible, flexible model of skills development with comprehensive professional development and mental health supports.

Impact to Date:

BHER has contributed to the growing focus and attention on WIL in Canada in recent years by providing a platform for leading employers and PSIs to share perspectives and engage in meaningful ways with other stakeholders.

These capacity building efforts and their ability to strengthen the momentum around 100% WIL has helped BHER make substantial progress towards their goal of 44,000 new WIL opportunities. By actively working with their 42 partners, in addition to leading the Canada Comeback Challenge, BHER and its partners have **committed to creating 39,948 WIL opportunities** (91% of target) as of October 31, 2021. Of these, **20,332 WIL opportunities have been completed** as of November 30, 2021. These opportunities were a direct impact of the work of BHER and its funded partners, with 93% of employers acknowledging that they are willing to **host the same or more WIL opportunities in the future** as a result of this program.

These targets were also achieved despite the challenges of COVID-19 and the acknowledgement by almost half of employers (46%) that COVID-19 impacted the number of WIL placements they could host. Finally, sixteen of BHER's funded partners are focused on equity, diversity and inclusion in WIL opportunities, with the majority of those serving Indigenous Peoples.

Employers surveyed cited a range of benefits from BHER's funded partnerships. These included greater awareness of WIL and an

expanded understanding of the full range of WIL opportunities possible. A total of **31% of employers hosted WIL placements for the first time** and 63% of employers felt the funded partnerships **made this process easier**. Employers cited the benefits of learning about **best practices** in recruiting (57%), supervising and mentoring students (56%), and hosting WIL opportunities (55%).

Employers cited gaining access to qualified students as a key benefit, with 72% of employers indicating they had **strengthened their talent pipeline**. Employers indicated they were **exposed to new ideas**, skills and talent, with 78% of employers benefitting from student skills and ideas, 80% having better resources to address their skills gap, and 51% improving their **organizational productivity**. Additionally, 20% of employers hired a student from a previous WIL opportunity. A total of 63% of employers said they would be **willing to host more WIL opportunities** in the future, with 30% committed to the same number of placements going forward.

With the pandemic, with the kind of work we do, we've seen a surge in demand for our services, and of course it can be overwhelming, and more hands make it easier for us. So these amazing students, they helped us grow our outreach, they helped us building new partnerships...they got us such amazing kind, generous stakeholders, that we were able to provide for the women that we serve."

— Employer

Employer Outcomes:

78%

gained new ideas, skills and/or knowledge from students

72%

said WIL had strengthened their talent pipeline

63%


found the process easier due to the funded partner

51%

reported improved organizational productivity

20%

hired a student from a past WIL



The creation of additional WIL opportunities was seen to be a key asset to **students**, as many highlighted the intense competition for limited WIL opportunities available. Students interviewed cited six key benefits to BHER's WIL program. These included establishing **personal connections** with employers and networks and gaining crucial experience working in the field; a greater **understanding of employer expectations** and the social norms and culture of organizations; exposure to **different career options; human skills** such as time management, communications, networking, collaboration and leadership; and **technical skills**, including research, report and technical writing, project management and analysis. Finally, while many students interviewed have not yet graduated, three of ten students have continued to work with their employer after the initial opportunity ended.

PSIs cited the importance of BHER support in strengthening and streamlining their institutional capacity to integrate and deliver more WIL opportunities. **Capacity building** support was also considered a unique contribution of BHER, as many other funding streams do not offer this support. PSIs also cited BHER support in allowing them to **host more WIL opportunities**, deepen their outreach and support for equity seeking groups, greater experimentation with emerging WIL models, and stronger engagement with employers. For some rural and remote institutions, BHER's support represented the **first opportunity** to offer a WIL opportunity to students.

Similar to PSIs, BHER's support has strengthened the capacity of its funded partners to facilitate or broker WIL opportunities between students and employers and enhanced their profile and brand recognition in this role.

"I was a lot more focused, and I knew what I wanted, but before I felt like I was just floating along with whatever I had to do, and in my fourth year I felt like I had a bit more direction thanks to the internship."

— Student

Improving Efficiency:

As BHER works with a diversity of partners, across different geographies and target groups, efforts were made to identify guidelines to improve efficiency of their funding work. This resulted in the identification of **three principles** to consider when selecting funded partners to improve the cost-effectiveness of WIL opportunities:

The partner is well-established in the ecosystem with a trusted brand

They have strong relationships with PSIs institutions

They have strong connections with employers.

Without this foundation, new organizations entering the WIL space require considerably more time and resources to establish the relationships and trust necessary to deliver new WIL opportunities.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The evaluation identified five strategic considerations and fourteen recommendations to further grow and strengthen BHER's WIL program and the WIL ecosystem more broadly.

The **five strategic considerations** represent choices and/or trade-offs in terms of reach, scale, cost and BHER's competitive advantage relative to other WIL ecosystem actors. These include:

- **Prioritizing large employers and organizations** to scale the number of WIL opportunities available nationally, while also ensuring WIL opportunities are available to underserved students which costs more and reaches fewer students but is vital to achieving universal access to WIL.
- **Striking the right balance** between direct delivery of WIL opportunities and BHER's broader advocacy agenda.
- **Targeting emerging WIL models** to earlier stages of the student lifecycle to expose students to this new form of learning and guide their early career decisions.
- **Contributing to the international research and evidence building agenda** for WIL, as part of BHER's future research and learning agenda.
- **Identifying realistic and meaningful metrics** to track key performance objectives, from efficiency to equity, diversity, and inclusion, that better align with BHER's approach.

As a result of the evaluation, **five overarching recommendations** were also identified to help direct BHER's WIL program going forward:

- **Continue to deliver WIL programming** as it is seen to address existing gaps in the WIL ecosystem.
- **Identify ways to deepen efforts to promote the value of WIL** to employers, both large and small, to increase their commitment to WIL opportunities.
- **Consider further opportunities** to grow mobilization, engagement and learning efforts to help advance the WIL ecosystem in Canada.
- **Explore ways to increase awareness of BHER's research**, knowledge products, tools and resources, funded partnerships and events by pushing out information on a regular and frequent basis to BHER stakeholders and funded partners.
- **Consider how to expand and deepen regional engagement** to ensure BHER's work reflects the needs of all Canadians.



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Blueprint