



EDI in WIL:

A Case Study of Industry Projects at Red River College Polytechnic

AT A GLANCE

PARTNERS: Red River College Polytechnic

COLLABORATORS: University of Manitoba

REGION: Manitoba

INDUSTRIES: Multiple, with a strong focus on business and tech

WIL TYPES: Co-op, Applied Research Projects, Industry Projects, Hackathons, Field Placements

TYPE OF LEARNING: Curricular

THEMES: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in WIL; International Students; Indigenous Students; Skills Articulation; Post-secondary WIL Services; Industry Engagement

SUMMARY: This case study details how strong employer engagement services and accessible work-integrated learning (WIL) are key tools in engaging equity-deserving and international students. Employers and educators seeking innovative ways to diversify their WIL programming can learn from the successes of this model.

Context

In 2022, BHER partnered with Red River College Polytechnic (RRC Polytech) to expand access to work-integrated learning (WIL) for equity-deserving students by strengthening employer engagement services and increasing the accessibility of WIL. Through the partnership, equity-deserving students gained access to greater flexibility when undertaking traditional placements, in addition to access to a variety of non-placement-based opportunities, such as industry projects and hackathons.

COVID-19 had disproportionate impacts on students and recent graduates from equity-deserving communities, including their access to inclusive WIL. Equity-deserving students may be unaware of opportunities, and may experience numerous challenges navigating recruitment, and have difficulty fitting WIL into their lives due to caretaker, financial, and other obligations.

Responding to these challenges, our partnership with RRC Polytech focused on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and capability expansion, with a view to strengthening accessibility and aligning with the revamped focus on hands-on learning in RRC Polytech's 2022-2026 strategic plan. As part of this plan, RRC Polytech has prioritized ensuring every student has at least one WIL opportunity before graduation, with tailored options to accommodate the individual needs and preferences of all students including international students. In this context, our partnership prioritized programming to strengthen employment outcomes for international and Indigenous students.

Due to a variety of constraints such as lack of social and professional networks, cross-cultural differences, developing language skills, and employer perception, international students often have limited access to WIL. This significantly impacts their employment prospects post-graduation. Our partnership with RRC Polytech involved the creation of a new Industry Liaison role focused on expanding employer engagement and securing meaningful opportunities for international students. By strengthening employer engagement, providing robust career development support, and increasing the flexibility and diversity of programming, RRC Polytech was successful in securing meaningful WIL opportunities for 398 international students.



Our partnership with RRC Polytech improved workforce readiness for diverse students, with 94% of survey participants reporting optimism about achieving success in the workforce because of the opportunity. This achievement reflects a momentous effort to strengthen multiple activities related to WIL at RRC Polytech, from streamlined employer engagement processes to career development supports that improve students' preparedness for WIL opportunities.

The success of this model led us to extend programming for additional years. This case study highlights key aspects of the RRC Polytech model and takeaways for other institutions with similar objectives.

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

RRC Polytech is committed to democratizing access to diverse WIL opportunities. To accomplish this, they have established the Industry Liaison role within a supporting employer engagement team. The employer engagement team curates student engagement opportunities designed to accommodate various types of employers, ranging from large corporations to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Recognizing the time constraints of industry leaders, they ensure employers have easy touchpoints with the institution.

By nurturing ongoing relationships with employers, the employer engagement team creates pathways for students to access WIL experiences. For SMEs lacking internal resources to support a spectrum of student needs, they act as a bridge, providing access to campus resources and thus ensuring students' success in WIL placements. When students encounter challenges securing WIL opportunities, the team engages directly with employers to figure out the underlying reasons for non-selection. This approach allows them to collaboratively devise solutions to enhance students' prospects.

To foster equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in professional environments, RRC Polytech hosts dedicated EDI events and conferences. These platforms offer training opportunities for employers to help them create inclusive workplaces. For example, the Engaging in WIL for the Changing Workplace conference brought together 74 employers and engaged 119 attendees to

discuss meaningful placements, mentorship, and a range of accessibility topics. Employers had the opportunity to learn about EDI in WIL and how to engage with students through applied research, co-ops, industry projects, and other WIL types.

The team also encourages industry involvement in diverse ways such as discussion panels, industry-sponsored projects, and inviting professionals to serve as advisors and consultants for course development. The consensus among the employers we spoke to was that they prefer increased engagement and greater exposure to students.

The Industry Liaison and employer engagement team created placements better matched to student interests and qualifications, offered more opportunities with competitive compensation, and increased traffic to career related events and services.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

RRC Polytech has both introduced new innovative WIL opportunities and enhanced traditional WIL program flexibility. For example, to serve the 30-40% of students pursuing part-time studies, RRC Polytech introduced extended 8-month part-time industry projects as an alternative to the standard 4-month full-time duration. And to better serve rural, remote, and Indigenous students, they introduced a Rural WIL program with a mix of traditional and innovative WIL opportunities and an Indigenous Sprint to Innovate hackathon focused on increasing Indigenous talent in the region's tech sector. Undergirding all new and existing WIL offerings is a commitment to comprehensive career support alongside each WIL opportunity.

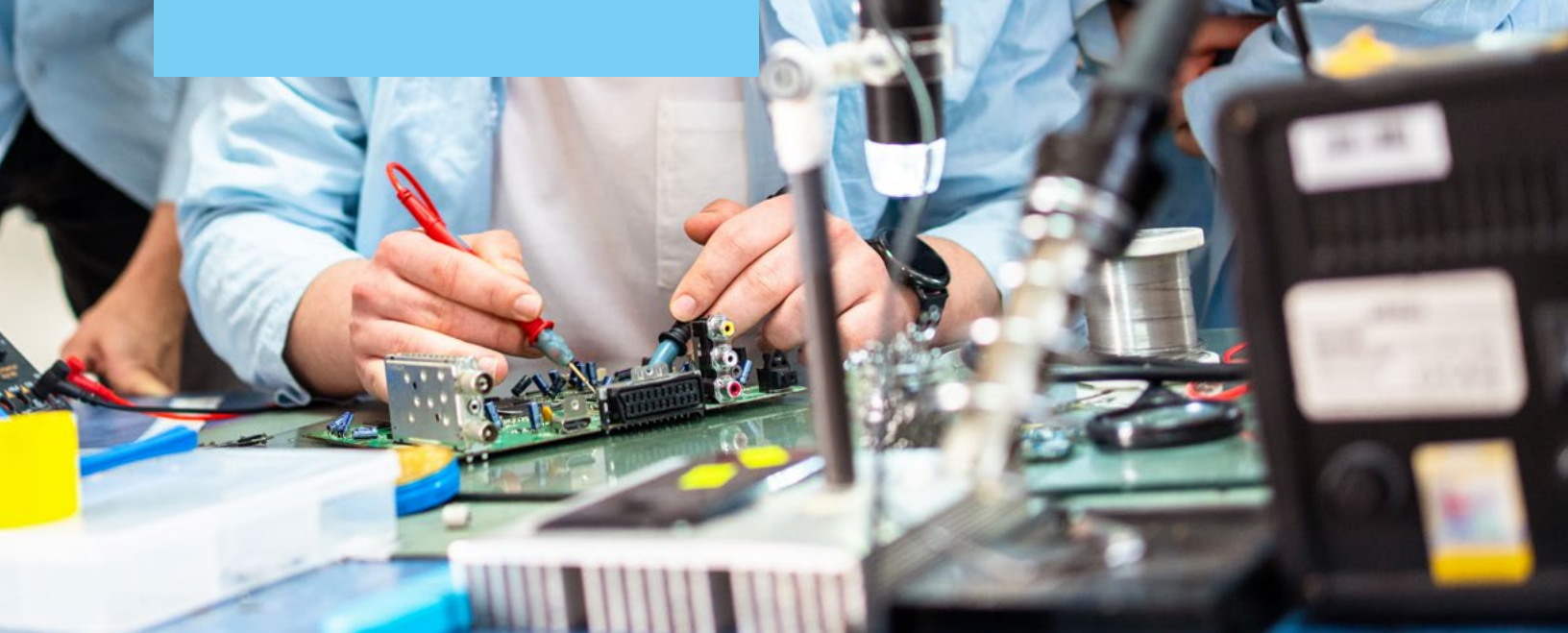
RRC Polytech's support system is tailored to benefit all students, with an emphasis on those from diverse backgrounds. This support system operates through a combination of group training sessions and individualized career guidance, and includes pre-WIL training, resume critiques, interview preparations, and more. These efforts have delivered strong results, with both students and employers noting exceptional improvements in skills articulation outcomes.



Through utilizing the WIL supports, 85% of students report that they have a stronger understanding of employer expectations and 88% say they are better able to articulate their skills. One employer reflects:

“In recent times, I see excellence in both [technical and soft skills]. I know Red River College has taken a concerted effort in developing those core skills.”

Importantly, the team collaborates closely with employers to ensure that students with disabilities receive necessary accommodations and support before embarking on their WIL experiences. In addition, recognizing the potential challenges faced by international and other equity-seeking students in accessing WIL opportunities through established networks, coordinators actively engage in facilitating connections to suitable placements aligned with their unique needs and academic programs.



VALUE OF THE MODEL

RRC Polytech's WIL model offers unique benefits for employers, post-secondaries, and students, in general and for those seeking to enhance EDI outcomes specifically.

Employer benefits:

- Access to workforce ready talent. During interviews with employers, we found that RRC Polytech has significantly increased resource allocation to enhance students' workplace readiness compared to previous years. Employers noted that incoming students possess a strong skill set and acknowledged the institution's efforts to hone these skills and overarching workforce readiness through experiential learning opportunities.
- Access to talent with a strong mix of technical and interpersonal skills. Employers also said that they observed a noticeable balance of excellence in both technical skills and soft skills among RRC Polytech students. The institution has been proactive in addressing core skills development, exemplified by initiatives such as focus groups conducted with co-op participants to improve interviewing techniques. This emphasis on communication skills alongside technical expertise is especially important for students from diverse language backgrounds and first-generation students, in today's competitive job market where proficiency in both areas is vital for success.

Post-secondary benefits:

- The Industry Liaison role and supporting employer engagement team increase traffic to career services and strengthen processes for employer communication, outreach, referrals, and overall engagement, leaving behind fewer students who may be unaware of or unable to access career services.
- The expansion of innovative WIL creates opportunities for collaboration across education sectors. For example, RRC Polytech has built stronger relationships with University of Manitoba, especially in relation to Indigenous WIL programming.

Student benefits:

- Students gain access to comprehensive and tailored support to ensure they are ready to succeed in their WILs. Students agree or strongly agree that they are better able to understand employer expectations (85%), establish their professional identity (82%), and identify future career goals (88%) because of their WIL experiences.
- 85% of students agree or strongly agree that they are better able to articulate their skills because of the RRC Polytech WIL opportunity.
- 94% of students, including international students, agree or strongly agree that they have the skills, knowledge, and experience to work towards their career goals, and that participating in a work-integrated learning opportunity helped them better prepare for the workforce.

Key takeaways

FOR INSTITUTIONS

Institutions seeking to improve WIL access for international, Indigenous, and equity-deserving students should consider enhancements to both employer engagement processes and supportive career services tailored to these populations. Establishing robust employer engagement systems that guide employers in fostering inclusive workplaces while creating opportunities for students to better prepare for and actively participate in WIL placements can further advance EDI outcomes.

FOR INDUSTRY

Businesses seeking to access diverse student talent, especially SMEs, should explore opportunities to utilize EDI resources available through post-secondary institutions.

Employers looking to strengthen their talent pipelines in the long run may consider more active involvement with polytechnic institutions. Active involvement and giving input to PSIs can shape their policies to better serve not only students but also employer needs. For example, industry professionals can enrich the community and increase campus awareness of their sectors by serving as consultants for courses or advisors and mentors for students, especially equity-seeking ones.



CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Interested in learning how your business or post-secondary institution can set up an innovative work-integrated learning program like Red River College Polytechnic? Connect with us at wilpartnerships@bher.ca

Check out more resources at <https://bher.ca/publications/case-studies>