BUSINESS + HIGHER EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

Innovative WIL:

A Case Study of Social Science, Humanities, and Arts Students in the Tech Sector

AT A GLANCE

PARTNERS: Western University & TechAlliance of Southwestern Ontario

REGION: Greater London Region

INDUSTRIES: Multiple, with a strong focus on SMEs in Tech

WIL TYPES: Industry Projects

TYPE OF LEARNING: Curricular

THEMES: Employment outcomes for Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities (SSHA) students; SME participation in WIL; Tech talent; regional talent retention strategies

SUMMARY: This case study details an efficient model of connecting tech sector employers to Social Science, Humanities, and Arts students through curricular work-integrated learning (WIL). Employers gain insight and support with small projects at zero cost.

Context

In 2021, BHER partnered with Western University to address the underrepresentation of students in the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts (SSHA) in work-integrated learning (WIL). Data from the National Graduates Survey (NGS) indicates that students in the Social Sciences (28%), Humanities (19%), and Arts (30%) have some of the lowest participation rates at the bachelor's level, compared to fields of study like health (83%) and education (92%) where WIL (clinicals, practicums, etc.) is often a key feature of program design (Galarneau et al, 2020).

As internship participation is optional, student awareness and engagement were relatively low among Western's SSHA students. These students also often lacked low-intensity WIL options in their first and second year, which act as a stepping stone to higher-intensity WIL options later (internships, co-ops, etc.) and ultimately smoother school to work transitions post-graduation.

Our partnership with Western and TechAlliance of Southwestern Ontario was designed to address this underrepresentation by implementing industry projects in several courses within Western's Faculty of Social Science, Faculty of Information & Media Studies, and Faculty of Arts & Humanities. A related objective was to strengthen talent pipelines for London's thriving tech sector by attracting an untapped population of liberal arts students that would be otherwise unlikely to consider a career in tech. Our initial goal was to engage 500 students. We surpassed that goal and were able to engage a total of 1067 students. The success of this partnership was due to the excellent relationships with both SMEs and SSHA faculty members, which ensured alignment with both industry needs and curricular objectives.

The efficiency and scalability of this model led us to extend this programming for another year. This case study highlights how we did it and what we learned.

TECHALLIANCE OF SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO

TechAlliance is a business accelerator that supports the growth of Canadian tech companies. In this partnership, they helped small and medium-sized businesses understand the benefits of WIL and access student talent for short-term projects. They also provided ongoing client support to ensure alignment of all stakeholders' needs.

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Industry projects are usually course-based and involve students working with an external partner to propose strategies that address a specific organizational challenge. In collaboration with TechAlliance, Western identified 16 tech companies in Southwestern Ontario with challenges that aligned with the learning outcomes of 8 courses. Over the course of the partnership, this has resulted in over 2000 unique WIL experiences.

Figure 1 offers a sample of the diversity of courses, businesses, and challenges covered. Each project was customized through early collaboration between the instructor and industry host and facilitated by industry project coordinators.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Students worked individually or in small teams on projects that were innovative, connected to course theory, and achievable within 2-10 weeks. Students had access to support from their instructor, teaching assistants, and a workshop for learning problem-solving techniques, improving entrepreneurial thinking, and developing transferable skills. Staff from Western's Morrissette Institute for Entrepreneurship also provided ongoing coaching and advising to students for the duration of the project.

There were three touch points between students and the industry partner: an initial session with an overview of the challenge, a midpoint check-in, and a final showcase/debrief. Students received valuable guidance at the midpoint and each student/group received feedback from the industry partner during the final meeting.

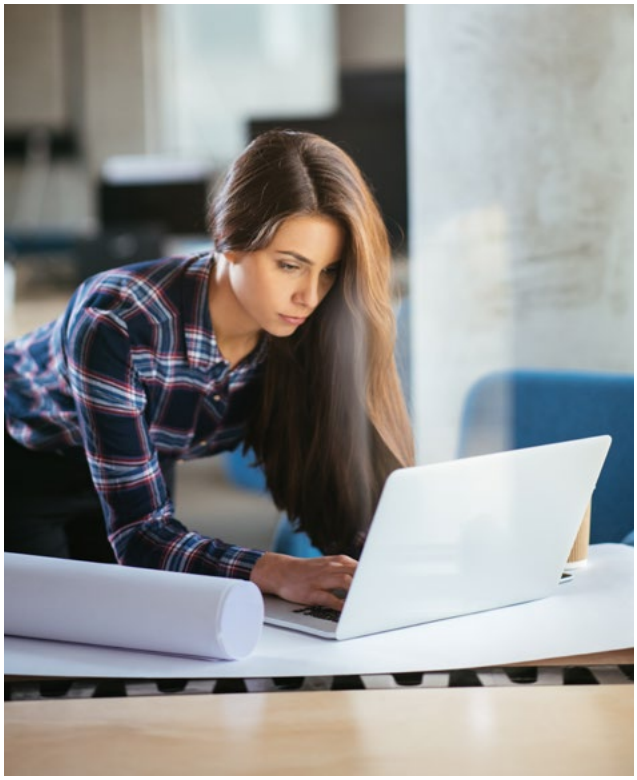

Figure 1

COURSE & STUDENTS	TECHALLIANCE PARTNER	CHALLENGE	INDUSTRY PROJECT FORMAT
Industrial Psychology *80 Students*	interVal	How can a small tech start-up embed mentorship concepts without having formal mentors?	The course partnered with one industry partner. Students worked in small groups on different aspects of the challenge to produce mini white-papers that were combined into one final report. The final report covered what mentorship entails, how to measure mentorship, how to evaluate a mentorship program, and how their research findings can be considered in the context of a small tech startup.
Research Methods for the Digital Age *103 Students*	Dieselmatic	How can a diesel repair shop use digital marketing strategies to gain and retain clients?	The course partnered with five industry partners on five different projects. Students worked in small groups to respond to each partner's challenges, resulting in multiple types of deliverables.
	Zersent	How can Zersent help companies to understand Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting and why it's important?	
	MINDS of London-Middlesex	What is the best way to get the attention and (most importantly) engagement of youth in the London-Middlesex region to support them in managing their mental health needs?	
	Caring Support	What is the best way for Caring Support to reach potential customers given their different needs and requirements for three audiences?	
	ATN Access	How can they support business to ergonomics, accommodation plans and workplace accessibility key drivers in their corporate culture?	

VALUE OF THE MODEL

The model offers unique benefits for employers, post-secondaries, faculty, and students.

Employer benefits

- Employers gain access to a low cost, flexible option for engaging student talent and building their brand on campus.
- Industry projects are lower time commitments than traditional placements.
- Businesses that do not have as much organizational capacity, such as small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), can use industry projects to move toward "nice-to-have" priorities that are often sidelined by day-to-day imperatives (e.g. marketing strategy, targeted research).
- Employers can benefit from multiple student groups on the same challenge, with flexibility to leverage key parts from each to build quick, viable solutions for the organization.
- Businesses can access young talent with skillsets and ideas unique to SSHA subfields like urban geography and industrial psychology.
- Employers get a high level of support from a partnerships coordinator responsible for making the university more accessible, and learn how they can effectively partner with the university and engage students in their organization via this initiative and beyond.

Post-secondary benefits:

- For post-secondaries working towards improving employment outcomes for SSHA students and/or a 100% WIL mandate, this model can reach a relatively high number of students with fewer WIL staff than would be required to deliver placement-based opportunities, as long as appropriate internal buy-in and resourcing to support course instructors and industry partners is allocated.
- The model is an appropriate way of engaging students earlier in their degree/diploma program (52% 2nd year students) so that they gain some industry exposure that strengthens their chances of success in securing and thriving in a placement (e.g., co-op) later in their degree or diploma.
- Western surpassed their WIL target by 156% and delivered with an extremely efficient employer: student ratio (approx. 1:110, course dependant).

Faculty/Instructor benefits:

- Instructors saw increased course engagement from students involved in industry projects, leading to better performance outcomes. Some instructors observed potential reputational benefits such as increased likelihood of satisfied students to leave a positive evaluation for their instructor.
- Instructors gain hands-on administrative support with the delivery of course-based industry projects, including managing relationships with industry partners, project design, and more. This support reduces the workload and ensures the feasibility of integrating industry projects that align with the instructor's learning outcomes.

Student benefits:

- Students gain access to entrepreneurial skills development workshops and apply their skills to a local industry challenge, with 87% reporting a high level of satisfaction with the program.
- Students are guided in learning about their strengths, alongside career development support to navigate the next stage of their career journey (e.g., job search, interview support, etc.) in the region's dynamic tech sector and beyond.
- After their experience, 88% reported that they were optimistic about achieving success in the workforce.

Key Takeaways

FOR EDUCATORS

Target instructors/courses whose teaching philosophy and course outlines already value hands-on or applied learning components.

Instructors buy-in and engagement in curricular WIL is a significant challenge for WIL administrators, particularly in the Social Sciences and Humanities. This case study shows how buy-in can be secured by targeting instructors whose teaching philosophy aligns with values of hands-on, applied, experiential, or real-world learning. Instructors' decision to deliver industry projects was tied to their teaching philosophy and approach around applied learning. While other considerations also influenced the instructors' decision, the strongest motivation we observed was tied to their teaching philosophy. Each of the instructors consulted for this report had a commitment to applied learning and had previously utilized hands-on pedagogies (e.g., field trips), which were significantly enhanced with the addition of WIL.

RECOGNIZE AND REDUCE ANY ADDITIONAL WORKLOAD FOR INSTRUCTORS.

The additional workload of incorporating an industry project into a course should be both recognized and mitigated through comprehensive administrative support. This workload may look very different based on the project design, which is usually influenced by class size, the number of industry partners involved, the type of deliverable the partner is looking for, and how many assignments are needed to meet that partner's expectations. Instructors told us that they would not be able to do this without the support of WIL administrators at both Western and TechAlliance.

WIL administrators are involved with the initial course selection process, faculty and industry outreach, recruitment and onboarding, project design and shaping, instructor and partner relationship management, and more. It is because of this heavy lifting that the added workload for instructors and industry partners remains manageable.

FOR EMPLOYERS

Industry projects are a great way to access new ideas and research insights while building relationships with post-secondary institutions.

For SMEs or any businesses that do not have the time or money to invest in research, partnering with a post-secondary institution on an industry project is a viable solution. They can gain access to cutting-edge postsecondary research through student talent. These projects can assist with getting some less urgent research done, while starting to build longer term relationships with post-secondary stakeholders.

Consider the type of research question you need answered and overall alignment with SSHA students' interests and skills.

Employers should bring forward research questions that are feasible for SSHA students' skills, such as questions that could be answered with a literature review or environmental scan. With a strong question, employers are likely to end up with multiple valuable perspectives, especially if they work with a large class. Employers should also be flexible and manage their expectations about the final deliverables from students, which may require some additional work to become usable and align with their organizational needs.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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

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