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# **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategies in WIL**



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CREATING QUALITY WIL ACROSS CANADA

# **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategies in WIL**

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# Introduction

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is a pathway to meaningful employment for post-secondary students and an opportunity for employers to access the talent they need. Yet many students continue to be left behind. By providing more WIL opportunities to equity-deserving students and equipping them with holistic skills and experiences, WIL can help level the playing field, while strengthening talent pipelines and organizational growth for employers.

**Students from equity-deserving communities/groups** includes, but is not limited to, students with unique or overlapping lived experience as a person with disability(ies); newcomers and/or refugees; international students; Black, First Nations, Inuit, and/or Métis, an Indigenous person from outside Turtle Island, and/or racialized/a person of colour; a woman; 2SLGBTQIA+; low socio-economic status; from a rural, remote, and/or Northern community; and/or from a community facing religious discrimination. We spoke to 180 business owners, senior executives, and supervisors at host organizations from across Canada about the barriers and enablers of their participation in WIL. We asked them about their experiences with recruiting, supervising, and mentoring diverse post-secondary students.

Despite their wealth of skills, experiences, and potential, students from equity-deserving communities face significant systemic barriers to post-secondary achievement and access to meaningful work. This also means equity-deserving students are less likely to complete a WIL experience during their studies. **More equitable access and increased representation in WIL placements is needed.** This is not just about numbers. It's about ensuring students receive impactful, high-quality experiences where they are engaged and supported and truly feel like they belong - whether they're in a two-week micro-WIL, a four month co-op, or a multi-year apprenticeship.

**Employers agree.** We spoke to 180 business owners, senior executives, and supervisors from across sectors and industries in Canada that provide WIL placements to students. We asked them about barriers to and enablers of providing WIL experiences to students, and focused on their experiences with engagement, recruitment, supervision, and mentorship. The value of providing equitable, diverse and inclusive WIL opportunities emerged as a key theme, as did the challenges associated in doing so. Often, employers said, they simply don't know where to start.

In response, BHER developed this guide to **help employers begin to embed an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) mindset into WIL.** The guide reflects our conversations with employers and strategies from applied research and on the ground initiatives. It is also built with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the realities they face in mind: limited access to dedicated EDI resources and limited capacity to prioritize EDI.

Though this guide is not intended as a comprehensive resource, it is meant to be a starting point and a means of connecting employers to key resources and supports. Employers will be able to identify steps and approaches to help develop an EDI mindset and provide more equitable, inclusive WIL experiences. It is meant to help employers to understand and value the unique and intersecting identities, lived experiences, skills, and perspectives of equity-deserving students and how these impact their needs in the workplace. The strategies and action items we offer here are not an exhaustive or definitive set of solutions, and no item alone is a silver bullet, but these are helpful starting points for organizations. They also respond to the barriers and challenges to EDI in WIL that we heard in our consultations with employers (see Appendix 1 for details). This guide is most immediately applicable to leadership, managers with HR responsibilities, and student placement supervisors given their roles in establishing and implementing strategies and policies for recruitment, talent management, and workplace culture.

**This guide reflects BHER's intention to contribute to a more equitable WIL ecosystem by ensuring equity and belonging are recognized as inherent to quality WIL experiences.** We strive to leverage our leadership in WIL to continue to develop employer-facing tools and resources in support of more representative, equitable WIL ecosystems.



# Why Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in WIL Matters

Systemic racism and discrimination, socioeconomic disparities, and inequitable access to resources and supports, affects well-being, school success, and career outcomes for students from equity-deserving communities.<sup>1</sup> While hard data on WIL participation rates across communities is limited, we know that students from equity-deserving groups are generally underrepresented in WIL placements and have a harder time accessing employment related to their studies.

## WIL Representation in Canada

- 37 per cent of visible minorities had employment related to their studies, compared to 48.1 per cent of non-visible minorities in Canada.<sup>2</sup> Note that the term “visible minority” is an official term used by the Government of Canada when conducting research and does not align with more commonly used language or terms chosen by racialized communities.
- Newcomers to Canada are less likely to participate in WIL programs, with 39.1 percent of newcomers participating in WIL at the bachelor level compared to 48.7 per cent for all students at this level.<sup>3</sup>
- Women represented 5.9% of new registrants in male-dominated trades in 2019.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Devah Pager and David S. Pedulla, “Race, Self-Selection, and the Job Search Process,” *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 4 (2015): 1005-1054, <http://hrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:25425089>; Wendy Cukier, Mark Campbell, and Lauren Mcnamara, *Ensuring Equitable Access to Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario* (Toronto: The Diversity Institute, 2018), [https://www.ryerson.ca/diversity/reports/Ensuring\\_Equitable\\_Access\\_to\\_Work-Integrated\\_Learning\\_in\\_Ontario.pdf](https://www.ryerson.ca/diversity/reports/Ensuring_Equitable_Access_to_Work-Integrated_Learning_in_Ontario.pdf)

2 Diane Galarneau, Mark Kinack, and George Marshall, *Work-integrated learning during post-secondary studies, 2015 graduates*. Statistics Canada, May 25, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2020001/article/00003-eng.htm>

3 Steve Martin and Brandon Rouleau, *An exploration of work, learning, and work-integrated learning in Canada using the longitudinal and international study of adults*, 2020. Statistics Canada, May 25, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-648-x/89-648-x2020001-eng.htm>.

4 Statistics Canada, Table 37-10-0023-01 Number of apprenticeship program regis-

Students from more privileged backgrounds tend to have greater flexibility in their choice of WIL placements, in part because they are more easily able to participate in unpaid WILs. This exacerbates an already uneven playing field for accessing future work experiences as students that are unable to participate in unpaid WILs are less likely to gain the types of experiences that employers look for in new graduates. And, unpaid WILs are a gendered challenge. At the bachelor's level, 64 per cent of male-identifying students experienced a paid placement, whereas only 23 per cent of female-identifying students had a paid WIL placement.<sup>5</sup> Paid WILs are also more common in programs and placements dominated by men, such as engineering, compared to those dominated by other genders, such as health and education.<sup>6</sup>



WIL students from equity-deserving groups also face additional barriers throughout WIL placements, such as anxieties about workplace discrimination, lack of affordable transportation options, unsupportive supervisors, and finding a general sense of belonging in organizations whose workforce may not reflect the student's lived experience.<sup>7</sup> For example, WIL host organizations that offer professional development programs that charge fees to participate may cause additional financial strain on low-income students without significant financial cushions.

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trations, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710002301>

5 Statistics Canada, *Work-integrated learning participation of postsecondary graduates, by province of study, level of study, field of study and sex*. Table 37-10-0186-01, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=3710018601>

6 Galarneau, Kinack, and Marshall, *Work-integrated learning*

7 Cukier, Campbell and Mcnamara, *Equitable Access to Work-Integrated Learning*; Jessica Brook et al., *Workplace Diversity, Inclusion, and Intersectionality* (San Francisco, CA: Culture Amp, 2019), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cdb02d1eb-fc7f4d8f68fd54/t/5dc4d2ce99115810dafa63a/1573180111889/Diversity%2C+Inclusion%2Cand+Intersectionality+2019.pdf>

Barriers to WIL access have been exacerbated for many students with the shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many WIL placements were cancelled, and available remote placements automatically excluded many students with limited access to reliable internet, especially those in rural, remote, or Northern communities where Internet reliability and bandwidth is often limited. This particularly affects Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) students, whose home communities are often in remote and/or Northern regions. The same is also true for students living in low-income urban areas who lack of quality, affordable Internet access.<sup>8</sup>

### **Despite inequities, WIL can also be an equalizer for students and a valuable tool for employers**

When done with EDI at the forefront, WIL can be an important pathway into meaningful employment for all students. WIL experiences can help shape a students' career goals, exposure to mentorship, and broaden their awareness of career possibilities.<sup>9</sup> It can also be an equalizer for marginalized students to access and grow awareness of new opportunities. And as we've heard loud and clear in our consultations, WIL is also an invaluable talent pipeline for employers across sectors and industries throughout Canada. WIL experiences ensure a steady stream of skilled, engaged workers post-graduation who are equipped with industry-level skills on day one. The return on investment for WIL is evident through the innovative advances organizations have made upon hiring WIL students; for example, post-secondary students apply new research and ideas from their coursework to offer fresh ideas for the workplace. The contributions of students bolster knowledge growth and translation for all WIL stakeholders.<sup>10</sup> **By adopting an EDI mindset and uplifting equity-deserving**

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8 Andrew Schrumm, Sonya Bell, and Tracee Smith, *Building Bandwidth: Preparing Indigenous Youth for a Digital Future* (Toronto: Royal Bank of Canada, 2021), <https://royal-bank-of-canada-2124.docs.contently.com/v/building-bandwidth-preparing-indigenous-youth-for-a-digital-future-pdf>; Emma Greenfield, "Digital Equity for Indigenous Communities," *Samuel Centre For Social Connectedness*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/digital-equity-for-indigenous-communities/>; Geoff McMaster, "How Indigenous communities are taking broadband internet access into their own hands," *University of Alberta*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.ualberta.ca/folio/2021/02/how-indigenous-communities-are-taking-broadband-internet-access-into-their-own-hands.html>.

9 Cukier, Campbell & Mcnamara, "Equitable Access to Work-Integrated Learning"

10 "Benefits of WIL," *Business and Higher Education Roundtable*, last modified 2020, <https://www.bher.ca/work-integrated-learning/benefits-wil>; Business and Higher



communities through meaningful commitments to equitable access, inclusion, and belonging in the workplace, everyone benefits. But as long as equity-deserving communities are left behind in WIL, employers are missing out too. Countless industry studies and stories from employers have underscored the value of a focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace - and not just when it comes to WIL. These are key assets to successful organizations with healthy workplaces and strong talent pipelines.<sup>11</sup>

## Embedding EDI into Your Workplace can:

### **PROVIDE ACCESS TO A MORE DIVERSE TALENT POOL THAN MIGHT OTHERWISE BE AVAILABLE THROUGH CONVENTIONAL RECRUITMENT METHODS**

Employers who seek to grow the diversity of their organizations are sometimes limited because they lack a diverse applicant pool. Yet there is an abundance of quality talent within equity-deserving communities and many ways to tap into these talent pools. For example, Black-focused professional development programs like ICON Talent Partners or community-specific recruitment fairs like Start Proud's annual Venture Out Conference showcasing 2SLGBTQ+ tech talent.<sup>12</sup> But employers need to be open to looking.

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Education Roundtable, *ROI: Beyond the Numbers Guide*. Business and Higher Education Roundtable, 2021, <http://www.bher.ca/wil-hub/create-quality-wil/roi-beyond-numbers>

<sup>11</sup> Catalyst, *Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter: Quick Take*. Catalyst, 2020, <https://www.catalyst.org/research/why-diversity-and-inclusion-matter/>; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, "The 50 – 30 Challenge: Your Diversity Advantage," last modified August 17, 2021, <http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/icgc.nsf/eng/07706.html>; Bessma Momani, Jillian Stirk, and Anna Klimbovskaia, "Why the Benefits of Diversity Are Not Theoretical," *Policy Options*, April 24, 2017, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/april-2017/why-the-benefits-of-diversity-are-not-theoretical/>; Brook et al., *Workplace Diversity, Inclusion, and Intersectionality*

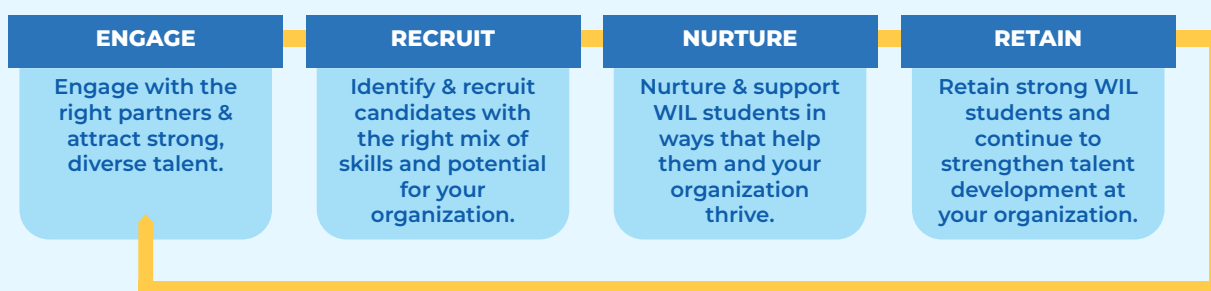
<sup>12</sup> ICON Talent Partners, last modified 2021, <https://icontalent.org>; Venture Out, last modified 2021, <https://www.ventureout.ca/aboutus>.

**Untapped pools of diverse talent can be found across Canada. Their lived experiences can help businesses grow, while ensuring organizations remain reflective of the values and diversity of their local and stakeholder communities.**

## IMPROVE CAPACITY TO DEVELOP TALENT IN-HOUSE, BUILD STRONG TEAMS, AND BOLSTER TALENT PIPELINES

New, well-rounded teams don't come pre-made. By participating in WIL, organizations can train and empower a new generation of students from equity-deserving communities by investing in their success early on in their career. As a result, employers are better equipped to recruit students with whom they have established relationships and who have relevant industry experience once they graduate.<sup>13</sup> As Figure 1 illustrates, EDI in WIL can benefit employers at each stage of WIL talent development:

### WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING (WIL) TALENT PIPELINE DEVELOPMENT



## PROVIDE ACCESS TO A GREATER RANGE OF IDEAS, SKILLS, AND PERSPECTIVES, WITH POTENTIAL INNOVATION AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION BENEFITS

Beyond the social and moral imperatives to foster inclusive, diverse workplaces, an EDI mindset allows organizations to grow and change for the better. Diverse teams that are representative of equity-deserving communities lead to a greater range of ideas, opinions, and perspectives that can drive not only industry innovation but culture change. Prioritizing EDI also helps prevent talent “brain drain” from regions, industries, and the Canadian economy more broadly. Research shows that across a wide range

13 Business and Higher Education Roundtable, “Benefits of WIL.”

of industries, increased racial and ethnocultural diversity among employees is associated with increased revenue, employee happiness, and productivity benefits.<sup>14</sup>

Through WIL, organizations can help to ensure that the individuals they recruit and train reflect their customers or communities in which they operate. And there are marked social and economic benefits of this. For-profit businesses that welcome diversity see increased revenue and consistent product loyalty from a more diverse consumer base.<sup>15</sup> For service-based organizations, EDI offers opportunities to develop programming tailored to specific communities which in turn attracts more participants: for example, we heard from some employers that they were better able to serve Indigenous communities because of the unique perspectives brought by Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) WIL students.

## Making EDI Happen

**Starting from an EDI mindset is key.** This involves an approach to student engagement that acknowledges and seeks to address the barriers that students from equity-deserving student communities face in accessing WILs. The challenges may seem insurmountable at first on different fronts; financial, social, logistical, but it is crucial to see the bigger picture. So much about EDI is the attitude that employers and supervisors adopt openness, honesty, and transparency with employees, and genuine dedication to EDI goes a long way in helping to establish inclusive environments and equitable opportunities. And, myriad resources and supports exist to help organizations thrive on their EDI journey, examples of which can be found throughout this section of the guide.

An EDI mindset recognizes that bringing in diverse talent is only part of the bigger solution.<sup>16</sup> Openness and flexibility to accommodate and

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14 Momani, Stirk, and Klimbovskaia, “Why the Benefits of Diversity Are Not Theoretical.”

15 Ibid.

16 Sarah Saska et al., *What about belonging? Why belonging is vital to your organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy*, (Toronto: Feminuity, n.d.) <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cdb02d1ebfc7f4d8f68fd54/t/5d9ced489f5e6e-3ab85f00f2/1570565448651/What+About+Belonging+%5BFEMINUNITY+RESOURCE%5D.pdf>.

support students from equity-deserving groups throughout their WIL experience is also key. WIL employers should be mindful that students have diverse needs and circumstances that may not have been disclosed to co-op or career offices that initially facilitated the WIL placement process. These may include ‘invisible needs’ - neurodiversity or mental illness, financial restrictions, caregiving or familial responsibilities, unwillingness or inability to travel for placements, amongst others.<sup>17</sup>



And of course an EDI mindset for WIL doesn't happen in a vacuum - it should be part and parcel with larger, long-term efforts to embed EDI into your organization's culture, values, policies, and practices. A workplace that embeds EDI avoids tokenizing or approaching EDI as a symbolic, box-checking exercise (e.g., hiring from equity-deserving communities just to meet a diversity target) and strives for justice, dignity, and belonging for everyone.<sup>18</sup> Many of the employers we spoke to noted the importance of prioritizing meaningful, evidence-based, and community-led EDI training for employees and to develop collaborative strategies for ensuring workplaces that are safe and inclusive.

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<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Mackaway, Theresa Winchester-Seeto, and Anna Rowe, "Responding to student diversity: Strategies for placing work-integrated education students," (presentation, New Zealand Association for Cooperative Education 2013 Conference on Strategic Direction in Cooperative Education, Auckland, NZ, April 21-23, 2013), <https://researchers.mq.edu.au/en/publications/responding-to-student-diversity-strategies-for-placing-work-integ>.

<sup>18</sup> Aida Mariam Davis, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion have failed. How about Belonging, Dignity and Justice instead?" *World Economic Forum*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/02/diversity-equity-inclusion-have-failed-belonging-dignity-justice/>; Catalyst, *Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter*; Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle et al., "Diversity wins: How inclusion matters," McKinsey & Company, May 19, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters#>; Social Chorus, "15 Ways to Improve Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace," *Social Chorus* (blog), July 14, 2021, <https://socialchorus.com/blog/15-ways-to-improve-diversity-and-inclusion-in-the-workplace/>

**By taking steps to understand and value the identities, lived experiences, skills, and needs of equity-deserving students, employers will be better positioned to take a hard look at workplace culture and address systemic barriers.**

# What are the Concrete Steps Employers Can Take?

## STEP 1: EVALUATE YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Understand your organization's strengths and weaknesses when it comes to EDI, and not only when it comes to WIL. The steps you take at an organizational level will benefit all aspects of talent development, including WIL. One way to start is to convene team members to undertake an informal Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis on EDI.<sup>19</sup> This exercise will help identify the most pressing gaps in your industry and/or organization's talent pipeline, think about which communities might be the highest priority for engagement, and identify which action items to tackle in the shorter versus longer-term. Start by discussing:

- What are the EDI and cultural strengths of our organization?

For example, which communities are well-represented in our organization? Is this representation spread throughout leadership, types of roles, and different career stages? Do all employees feel engaged and included? What kinds of EDI initiatives, resources, events, and training exist at or are offered through our organization? Have they been helpful and impactful for staff from different communities?

- What are the EDI and cultural weaknesses of our organization?

For example, which groups are underrepresented in our organization as a whole, and across roles and career stages? Are there critical gaps in feelings of engagement and inclusion? If so, what is driving them?

- What opportunities exist to strengthen EDI at our organization?

For example, how can we improve the diversity of our talent pipeline so that it better reflects the population of our region, customers, and/or local or targeted communities? How can we improve our employee engagement,

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<sup>19</sup> TC Bell, "Let's talk strategy #3: How to Create a Really Simple SWOT Analysis," *LinkedIn*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/lets-talk-strategy-3-how-create-really-simple-swot-analysis-bell-/?articleId=6601563750149476352>.

inclusion, and workplace culture through EDI? What kinds of EDI initiatives, resources, events, and/or training are needed as next steps to achieve this (e.g., gender-inclusive language on documents like applications; proactively offering accommodations for neurodiverse or disabled employees; anti-racist, anti-bullying, and anti-harassment initiatives and/or policies)?

- What are the biggest constraints to embedding EDI into our workplace?

For example, are the physical and/or virtual workspaces of your organization accessible for disabled employees? Is there interest and engagement from staff at all levels on the importance of EDI initiatives, or is there resistance? Consider how you might start to tackle these constraints (e.g., accessibility of physical and digital infrastructure, available benefits, geographic accessibility, EDI training and awareness building opportunities, and more).

- Do employees have access to quality professional development and wraparound supports?

For example, is there access to supports or accommodations for mental health, disabilities, religious practices, or transitioning at work for transgender employees? What other forms of support or professional development resources are wanted or needed by employees?

Engaging team members in focused conversations helps make sure any changes or action taken on EDI reflect employee voices. This in turn helps bring all employees along on your EDI journey and makes sure this journey is unique to the strengths and needs of your organization.

## Supports to make EDI happen

If an organization is limited in resources or capacity to audit, adjust processes, or launch EDI-centered initiatives there are many independent EDI-driven workforce development agencies, non-profits, and community organizations that offer supports, workshops, and a wealth of existing toolkits and digital resources, often freely available. Some examples include:

- Pride at Work Canada's Workplace Audit and employer resources on workplace inclusion<sup>20</sup>

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20 Pride at Work Canada, "Workplace Audit," last modified 2016, <https://pride-atwork.ca/programs/lgbt-workplace-inclusion-index/>; Pride at Work Canada, "Hiring



- Civic Action’s HireNext Assessment Tool<sup>21</sup>
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB)’s Come to Work Program<sup>22</sup>
- Black Professionals in Tech Network’s Black Tech Experience Assessment Tool<sup>23</sup>
- Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women’s Intersectionality Wheel<sup>24</sup>
- Toolkit on Intersectional Mainstreaming: A Resource for Organizations, Volunteers and Allies<sup>25</sup>
- Finally, you can access BHER’s [Financial Supports Catalogue](#), a one-stop employer resource that brings together and details information on the funding supports available to hire students from equity-deserving communities in specific regions/jurisdictions

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*Across All Spectrums: A Report on Broadening Opportunities for LGBTQ2+ Job-seekers.* Toronto: Pride at Work Canada, 2018, [https://prideatwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PrideAtWork\\_2018\\_Round\\_FINAL-s.pdf](https://prideatwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PrideAtWork_2018_Round_FINAL-s.pdf); Pride at Work Canada and Great Place to Work, *Beyond Diversity: An LGBT Best Practice Guide for Employers.* Toronto: Pride at Work Canada, 2017, <https://prideatwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Beyond-Diversity-LGBT-Guide.pdf>

21 CivicAction, “HireNext,” last modified 2020, <https://hirenext.civicaaction.ca>.

22 Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), “I Want to Connect with Talent: Come to Work,” last modified 2021, <https://cnib.ca/en/programs-and-services/work/i-want-connect-talent-come-work>

23 Black Professionals in Tech Network, “Black Tech Experience Assessment Tool,” <https://assessment.bptn.ca>

24 Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, “Feminist Intersectionality and GBA+,” <https://www.criaw-icref.ca/our-work/feminist-intersectionality-and-gba/>

25 Joana Xhemali and Dresda Emma Méndez de la Brena, *Toolkit on Intersectional Mainstreaming: A resource for organizations, volunteers and allies.* European Union: Gender Equality and Intersectionality Lab, Erasmus Mundus Association, 2020, [https://www.esaa-eu.org/fileadmin/esaa/content/communication\\_kit/toolkit\\_on\\_intersectional\\_mainstreaming-komprimiert.pdf](https://www.esaa-eu.org/fileadmin/esaa/content/communication_kit/toolkit_on_intersectional_mainstreaming-komprimiert.pdf)

## STEP 2: BUILD CAPACITY FOR INCLUSIVE, STUDENT-CENTERED ENGAGEMENT

Leverage partnerships with co-op offices and build relationships with unconventional, on-the-ground partners like student unions and associations, campus resource centres and affinity groups, and national and local EDI-centric organizations (listed above) to help your organization drive **inclusive, student-centered engagement**. Many of these partners seek to support employers in their efforts to advance accessibility and equity for students.

The goal with inclusive engagement is to not only build awareness among students from equity-deserving groups but to help them see themselves in your organization. This involves keeping recruitment materials up to date. Recruitment materials can be used to speak to your organization's EDI commitments. Be authentic by being specific about what these are, how they are being achieved, and/or how students will be accommodated. This also involves being transparent about how successful these commitments have been. And be mindful about the language and tone of recruitment materials by removing gender biased language from job ads, for example, as biased or exclusionary language can discourage students from even considering organizations.<sup>26</sup>

Also make sure to send ads through channels that are tapped into diverse student communities, such as affinity-based campus clubs, seek student feedback on your engagement and recruitment efforts to keep them relevant to student needs, and become involved in community and campus initiatives like student networking events. Some of these include:

- CEE (Careers, Education, Empowerment) Centre for Young Black Professionals' Career Training Programs<sup>27</sup>

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26 Carmen Nobel, "How To Take Gender Bias Out of Your Job Ads," *Forbes*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hbsworkingknowledge/2016/12/14/how-to-take-gender-bias-out-of-your-job-ads/?sh=1015e1dd1024>

27 Careers, Education, Empowerment (CEE) Centre for Young Black Professionals, "Career Training: 2021/2022 Programs," last modified 2020, <https://ceetoronto.org/programs/>

- Start Proud’s monthly networking events for 2SLGBTQ+ professionals in across Canada<sup>28</sup>
- Black Business and Professional Association’s National Youth Summit<sup>29</sup>
- Newcomer Students’ Association Immigrant Women’s National Network, which provides mentorship and networking opportunities<sup>30</sup>
- Society for Canadian Women in STEM and Technology’s membership program, which includes networking, mentorship, events, skills development and volunteering opportunities<sup>31</sup>
- Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity’s National Youth Summit<sup>32</sup>
- National Educational Association of Disabled Students’ Duty to Accommodate and Disclosure in Employment Guide<sup>33</sup>
- Youth 4 Youth Quebec’s networking opportunities for English-speaking youth in Quebec<sup>34</sup>

Genuine, respectful relationships with student and community groups and deferring to their expertise will help build your organization’s capacity to effectively and more easily engage, recruit, and support students from equity-deserving groups in the longer-term.

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28 Start Proud, “Events,” <https://startproud.org/eventoverview/>

29 Black Business and Professional Association, “Programs,” last modified 2021, <https://bbpa.org/programs/>

30 Newcomer Students’ Association, “Immigrant Women’s National Network,” <https://mynsa.ca/iwnn/>

31 Society for Canadian Women in Science and Technology, “ms infinity | Youth Engagement,” last modified 2021, <https://scwist.ca/programs/ms-infinity/>

32 Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity, “National Youth Summit,” last modified 2021, <https://www.ccpj-ccyp.org/national-youth-summit>

33 Samantha Dubord, *Duty to Accommodate and Disclosure in Employment Guide*. Ottawa: National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2017, [https://needs.ca/en/about/projects/duty\\_accomm/index.php](https://needs.ca/en/about/projects/duty_accomm/index.php)

34 Youth 4 Youth Quebec, “Vision, Mission, Values,” last modified 2021, <https://www.y4yquebec.org/vision-mission-values-history>

## STEP 3: INTERRUPT EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT BIASES AND BARRIERS DURING RECRUITMENT

Despite good intentions, standard application review and interview processes are often biased in favour of candidates from privileged backgrounds who automatically have advantages in the job market due to their identity.<sup>35</sup>

It is critical for employers to be aware of how systemic racism and internalized biases and stereotypes (even if unintentional) - including ableism, racism, and other forms of discrimination - impact how WIL students are hired. Examples might include unintentionally screening out students with non-white or non-Westernized names or neurodiverse interviewees because traditional interview formats privilege the social cues and communication styles of neurotypical interviewees.

Employers can make proactive and straightforward adjustments to recruitment policies and practices that can "interrupt" biases and systemic discrimination.<sup>36</sup> Examples include:

- Resume screening strategies, like redacting information that might indicate gender or race<sup>37</sup>
- Structured interviews with consistent, pre-specified questions for each candidate<sup>38</sup>

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35 Peter Bailinson et al., *Understanding organizational barriers to a more inclusive workplace*. McKinsey & Company, June 23, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/understanding-organizational-barriers-to-a-more-inclusive-workplace>; Bryan Hancock and Monne Williams, "One move companies can take to improve diversity," *McKinsey & Company*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/one-move-companies-can-take-to-improve-diversity>

36 Behavioural Insights Unit, *Behavioural Approaches to Increasing Workforce Diversity*. Sydney, NSW: Department of Premier and Cabinet, State of New South Wales, August 2016, <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2016-08/apo-nid181231.pdf>

37 Nancy Volkens, "Hiring Without A Net," *People Science*, June 20, 2018, <https://peoplescience.maritz.com/Articles/2018/Hiring-Without-a-Net>

38 Iris Bohnet, "How to Take the Bias Out of Interviews," *Harvard Business Review*, April 18, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/04/how-to-take-the-bias-out-of-interviews>

- Skills-based assessments in lieu of or with equal weight as interviews or providing options for alternate forms of interaction with neurodiverse and/or disabled students<sup>39</sup>
- De-identifying and randomizing answers to screening or assessment questions, especially when conducting multi-stage recruitment cycles that require different members of the organization to review applications<sup>40</sup>

It's important to note that each of these practices on their own will not address all hiring challenges and neither is this list exhaustive of all ways employers can de-bias hiring. Embedding a range of intentional practices to make recruitment more equitable and accessible, though, can help ensure hidden biases are not a factor in preventing organizations from becoming more diverse and inclusive.

## **STEP 4: FOCUS ON THE ENTIRE WIL EXPERIENCE**

Provide inclusive experiences through student-centered, equity-driven onboarding, mentorship, and professional development opportunities.

### **Onboarding**

Inclusive, accessible onboarding practices can and should create a welcoming environment for WIL students on day one. In addition to providing students with all the key information, such as the organizational makeup, contacts of the leadership team, and so forth, supervisors should contextualize the WIL experience alongside the broader goals of the organization. How will the student's contributions support and help grow the team? What does the long-term, big picture strategy look like for your organization?

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39 In-Sue Oh, Bennett E. Postlethwaite, and Frank L. Schmidt, "Rethinking the Validity of Interviews for Employment Decision Making: Implications of Recent Development in Meta-Analysis," in *Received wisdom, kernels of truth, and boundary conditions in organizational studies*, eds. D.J. Svyantek & K.T. Mahoney, Charlotte, NC: IAP Information Age Publishing, 2013, 297–329 <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2013-26113-012>

40 Kate Glazebrook and Janna Ter Meer, "Hiring, honeybees and human decision-making," *Applied (for Medium)*, June 29, 2017, <https://medium.com/finding-needles-in-haystacks/hiring-honeybees-and-human-decision-making-33f3a9d76763>

It is also crucial to build trust between WIL students and supervisors at the onset to ensure students feel confident enough in their role at the organization to voice their opinions and concerns. By asking for their input from the start of their placement, students will be more empowered to speak up and offer invaluable insights that can benefit the organization's work throughout the duration of their WIL experience. This is especially important to maintain an accessible workplace culture; for example, disabled students may not feel comfortable disclosing their disability or required accommodations during the onboarding process because they do not want to jeopardize their position or be seen as "difficult" to work with.

Flexibility and openness to accommodating the changing needs of WIL students and employees is important, especially since accessibility needs can change depending on the day. WIL students should feel supported enough to disclose any issues that may affect their ability to work or feel valued as a member of the team.

## **Mentorship**

Mentorship can help instill confidence and a sense of belonging in students and ensures they have someone experienced to turn to for support and advice. Mentors can have important conversations with students about their hopes and expectations for the WIL experience. Who do they want to meet? What do they want to accomplish? What are their concerns about the experience and how can they formulate a plan to address them?

Wherever possible, connecting students from equity-deserving communities with mentors who have similar backgrounds or identity-based experiences is strongly recommended.

Mentorship does not, and should not, look the same across all regions and communities. Where it's challenging to connect students with mentors who have similar backgrounds or experiences, mentors with a willingness to listen, learn, and be flexible can still be able to facilitate inclusive WIL environments. You can access BHER's [Mentorship resources](#) to learn more.

## **Professional Development**

Another way to promote equitable, inclusive workplaces is to encourage students to participate in a variety of



professional development opportunities. These might include:

- Peer learning among WIL students both within and across organizations, and with colleagues spanning career stages through activities like job shadowing, reverse-mentoring, or monthly career chats with senior leadership.
- Informal social events, lunch and learns, or access to formal training and micro-credential programs.
- Encouragement to seek out external initiatives, such as talks held by partner organizations or networking events for students and/or young professionals.

Intentionally integrating these experiences as much as possible into WIL opportunities will help ensure these opportunities are available to all students that join your organization.

## **STEP 5: SEEK FEEDBACK AND FOCUS ON CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT**

The process of building and embedding EDI into WIL is iterative and requires feedback and actionable responses. This means checking in with PSIs and EDI partners, but especially with students on their needs and suggestions during recruitment and onboarding, as well as throughout their placement and during their offboarding. What could be improved? What types of policies and practices would make individual students feel empowered, motivated, and safer, or would make the workplace a more welcoming place? How have or will these considerations change across remote, virtual, in-person, and hybrid environments? Also remember, though, that while employers should provide ample opportunity for student feedback **it is not the responsibility of students from equity-deserving groups to provide formal lessons to staff or emotional labour on how the organization can improve simply because they identify as part of a marginalized community.**<sup>41</sup> Professional EDI organizations offer these services specifically for workplaces.

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41 Sonja Gittens-Ottley, "Inclusion starts on day one: 10 Ways to Build an Inclusive Onboarding Experience," *Wavelength by Asana*, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://wavelength.asana.com/inclusive-onboarding-experience/#close>; Fiona Young, "The ultimate guide to inclusive onboarding," *Hive Learning*, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.hivelearning.com/site/resource/diversity-inclusion/the-ultimate-guide-to-inclusive-onboarding/>

It's also important that workplace supervisors seek a deeper understanding of what it means to be a genuine ally for students from different equity-deserving groups and to have meaningful conversations with students, post-secondary institutions, and community partners about what this entails. Leadership should model and support these tangible behavioural and practical shifts to an EDI mindset.

Finally, keep track of what works, and what doesn't. Use tools like feedback and engagement surveys that get specific about different initiatives and experiences, and track key indicators like student outcomes (e.g., demographics of students that are brought in and retained over time) as though they are core key performance indicators.<sup>42</sup> Check out our [How to Calculate Your ROI: A Step by Step Guide](#) to learn how to track the social return on investment from EDI initiatives.<sup>43</sup>

Even though WIL opportunities are temporary, students in placements deserve to be treated as legitimate employees whose opinions and contributions are valued and credited. Moreover, employers should offer at least the same calibre of onboarding and offboarding practices as they would to other full-time employees. WIL placements are meant to provide students with workplace and industry insights, which includes organizational culture. If lived experiences are recognized and accommodations are properly supported by their employer and their school, WIL students can thrive and become the kinds of stellar employees organizations look for. Students who have completed a WIL placement often return to their host organization to volunteer or interview for full-time, post-graduation positions. Employers who offer students a thoughtful, well-rounded WIL experience will receive like-minded students and future employees in return. For more information, check out BHER's [Performance Assessment Strategies in WIL](#) guide.



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42 Joseph Warren, "Measure What Counts! Metrics for Successful Diversity and Inclusion," *DiversityCan*, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.diversitycan.com/Articles.aspx?type=tops&id=Measure-What-Couts-Metrics-for-Successful-Diversity-ad-Iclusio-2993>

43 Business and Higher Education Roundtable, *How to Calculate Your ROI: A Step by Step Guide*



# Bringing it all Together

WIL provides a means of levelling the playing field for equity-deserving groups while helping employers to strengthen their talent pipelines. Although there are challenges to engaging diverse communities through WIL, they are not insurmountable - and the outcomes are worth it.

This guide has attempted to provide helpful suggestions and clear ideas on how to embrace EDI through WIL. We've emphasized the importance of treating WIL students, especially those from equity-deserving groups, as equal contributors to an organization and as deserving of impactful, quality WIL experiences. We've also emphasized the importance of an EDI mindset through continuous progress towards culture change with concrete ways to do this through partnerships, tools, and resources.

It's one thing to be pro-diversity and make surface-level changes, and it's another thing altogether to establish truly inclusive workplaces. A diversity statement committing to anti-racism or accessibility, for example, without any concrete plans for action is not enough.<sup>44</sup>

If an organization isn't where it needs to be yet, it's ok to admit that. Transparency around where you're at and where you want to be can be helpful and beneficial for internal growth. Setting achievable short and long-term goals, identifying what success looks like, and explaining how the organization will be held accountable can help ensure progress towards equity, diversity, and inclusion.

**BHER is committed to developing tools and resources dedicated to strengthening WIL pathways for students and ensuring that more equity-deserving students in Canada are engaged, supported, and feel like they belong.** Our goals are to remain relevant to student needs, remove barriers to WIL access, improve experiences, and support employers in more meaningful ways.

**We welcome any feedback, emerging research, success stories, and resources on EDI in WIL that you think should be on our radar.** Our EDI in WIL tools and resources will continue to evolve and reflect our ongoing consultations with EDI thought leaders and post-secondary students. We encourage you to contact us at [comms@bher.ca](mailto:comms@bher.ca).

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44 Davis, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion have failed."

# Methodology

We facilitated 24, 90-minute live online focus groups with a total of 180 employer representatives including 21 English language groups and three French language groups:

- Nine groups with business owners and CEOs, including five groups with representatives from SMEs (<200) and four with representatives from larger organizations (200+).
- Seven groups with senior executives including four with representatives from SMEs (<200) and three from 200+ organizations.
- Eight groups with workplace supervisors including four from SMEs (<200) and four from 200+ organizations.

Virtual focus groups integrated live polling and discussion with a small group of employer representatives. Participants were asked to complete a brief survey prior to attending a focus group. Discussions focused on key benefits, barriers, and enablers of employer participation in WIL programs. Although equity, diversity, and inclusion wasn't a primary topic of these discussions, it was integrated into discussion probes and emerged as a key theme at the analysis stage.

This work was part of a larger consultation project on employer participation in WIL. In the larger project, we conducted 44 group consultations and 23 individual consultations on WIL, including the 24 employer focus groups. In total, we engaged 620 individual participants in this consultation project.

Alongside the consultations, we conducted a literature review looking at peer reviewed and grey literature on practices and principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion and applied behavioural science in the workplace.

Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo 12 qualitative data management software. Equity, diversity, and inclusion content was analyzed using a collaborative, thematic coding process.

# Appendix A

## WHAT WE HEARD ON EMPLOYER BARRIERS

The barriers noted here represent a subset of employer barriers discussed in our WIL consultations that relate most closely to EDI in WIL. While these EDI barriers reflect our conversations with employers in the context of WIL, what we heard converges with common EDI barriers uncovered across applied research initiatives on workplace EDI.

For a full overview of employer barriers to WIL, see BHER's report with the Conference Board of Canada and the Future Skills Centre on [WIL in a Post-COVID World](#).

### Where to Start

Employers often don't know where to start on tackling EDI challenges and strategies - whether specific to WIL recruitment and supervision, or at an organizational level. They need additional support and access to actionable tools and resources. SMEs especially often lack the capacity to navigate the processes of getting WIL programming set-up and to make connections to schools and communities in ways that engage students from underrepresented or equity-deserving groups.<sup>45</sup> And with limited time to attract and manage talent, employers tend to rely on informal networks of friends and colleagues. This approach can result in a homogenous workforce that is inherently inaccessible to many equity-deserving communities because people tend to hire individuals like themselves - whether intentionally or not - and leadership in many industries is overwhelmingly white, male, and upper-middle class.

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45 Tania Saba and Simon Blanchette, *Small and Medium-Sized Employers (SMEs): Skills Gaps and Future Skills*. Toronto, Ontario Chamber of Commerce, October 2020, <http://www.deslibris.ca/ID/10105207>; Andrew Bieler, *Work-Integrated Learning in the Post COVID-19 World*. Ottawa, Conference Board of Canada, January 2021, [https://www.conferenceboard.ca/temp/9aba6939-199e-43b1-a6ef-58abf6b894ea/10942\\_Work%20Integrated%20Learning\\_IP.pdf](https://www.conferenceboard.ca/temp/9aba6939-199e-43b1-a6ef-58abf6b894ea/10942_Work%20Integrated%20Learning_IP.pdf)

These challenges don't stop with recruitment. Students from equity-deserving communities that are recruited into or accept WIL placements may feel isolated or out of place in workplace communities where they don't see people who look like themselves or face hostile or discriminatory environments. For example, students of colour entering white-dominated industries or newcomer students speaking English as a second language at work. And, onboarding, accommodations, mentorship, and other forms of support throughout WIL placements are typically built and implemented without the needs and realities of equity-deserving groups in mind. Addressing these challenges can feel insurmountable to employers.

### **Financial & resource barriers**

Many employers would like to participate in WIL and use WIL programs to develop more diverse and inclusive workplaces but face significant financial and resource barriers. Most notably this includes a lack of staff capacity to launch WIL programming and engage and supervise WIL students. Also, SMEs oftentimes do not have the capacity to wade through the many rules and requirements of orchestrating a WIL program. These processes are intended to ensure quality, safe, and meaningful WIL experiences for students, but navigating the bureaucracy can make it difficult and time-consuming for SMEs to engage in WIL - and to do so with equitable recruitment at the forefront.

Many SMEs are also in need of financial support (through substantial and sustained grants and subsidies) to be able to provide paid WIL opportunities, which disproportionately impacts recruitment of students from equity-deserving groups. A range of grants and subsidies are available to employers who hire students from equity-deserving groups, but staying up to date with these or being able to navigate application processes is a large hurdle. There's no central hub for these resources, and the financial supports that exist don't always meet employers' needs. For example, certain funding opportunities are limited to Canadian citizens, though many of the SME employers we spoke to want to recruit international students that possess the skill sets they seek. Ultimately, financial constraints and inaccessible funding can affect equitable hiring decisions.<sup>46</sup>

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46 Bieler, *Work-Integrated Learning in a Post COVID-19 World*.

## Rural, Remote, & Northern challenges

Rural, remote, and Northern areas are often home to Indigenous communities who have been shut out of equitable access to career development opportunities like WIL due to colonization, displacement, anti-Indigenous racism, and intergenerational trauma. Because Indigenous communities may be physically harder to reach, employers may think that it is not worth it to make the effort at all. Yet there is strong talent within the many vibrant rural, remote, and Northern Indigenous communities, and Indigenous-led organizations like Indspire and Indigenous Works are at the forefront of ensuring Indigenous participation and leadership in career development opportunities and building employer-student connections.<sup>47</sup>

Employers in rural, remote, and Northern regions face additional barriers to participating in WIL. The absence of high-speed Internet limits the ability of organizations to provide remote WIL opportunities, and where high-speed Internet is available, SMEs may not be in a financial position to provide a student with the technologies needed for quality remote WILs. For in-person placements, employers that are located far from the nearest college, university, or other communities that students may live in have a limited local pool of students that are able to or willing to join their organization.

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47 Indigenous Works, "About," <https://indigenousworks.ca/en/about>; Indspire, "About," last modified 2021, <https://indspire.ca/about/>; Native Women's Association of Canada, "About," <https://www.nwac.ca/about/>; The Martin Family Initiative, "Our Mission," last modified 2021, <https://themfi.ca/our-mission/>

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