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MOWAT NOTE

# Combining School & Work

An update on postsecondary student  
employment in Canada

BY ANDREW PARKIN, WITH BRAD SEWARD  
& KHUONG TRUONG

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## Mowat Centre

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A photograph of a classroom. In the background, a chalkboard is filled with handwritten mathematical equations and diagrams. The foreground shows several rows of light-colored wooden desks and chairs, arranged in a typical classroom layout. The lighting is bright, and the overall scene is clean and organized.

**Increasingly,  
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# Introduction

Postsecondary students have long sought to combine their studies with some form of part-time or summer employment in order help cover the costs of their education. Increasingly, however, combining postsecondary education (PSE) and employment is seen not only as a way of managing costs but also as a way of enhancing skills.

Amidst concerns from students about shifts in the demand for skills in a rapidly changing labour market, and concerns from employers about the difficulties in finding new employees with the skills they need, programs that combine learning and working experiences appear to offer a means of bridging the gap between the worlds of education and employment.

In this context, governments, educators, employers and students have begun to emphasize the benefits of experiential or work-integrated learning (WIL). Experiential learning has been defined as “the process of learning or developing skills and abilities by placing students in workplaces, or in environments that simulate workplaces, so that they can learn while doing.”<sup>1</sup> Those preferring the term “work-integrated learning” tend to define it as “the process whereby students come to learn from experiences in educational and practice settings and integrate the contributions of those experiences in developing the understandings, procedures and dispositions required for effective professional practice, including criticality.”<sup>2</sup>

## Work-integrated learning in context

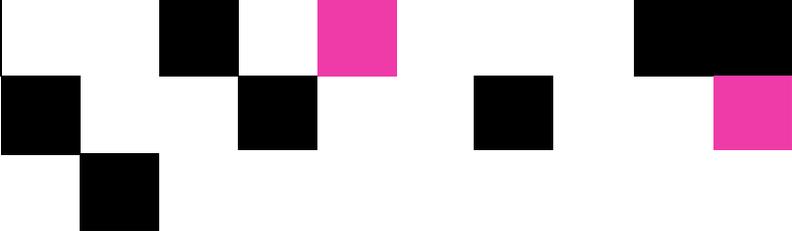
Experiential learning and WIL are general headings that cover a wide range of specific types of programs. A typology of WIL developed by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) includes apprenticeships, field experience, mandatory professional practice, co-op, internships, applied research projects and service-learning.<sup>3</sup> The Ontario Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, held in 2016, includes in its typology co-op education, work-placement programs, mentorships, industry-recognized in-class projects, internships, summer jobs/experience programs, volunteer positions and apprenticeship.<sup>4</sup>

1 The Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility* (Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2016); [https://files.ontario.ca/hsw\\_rev\\_engaoda\\_webfinal\\_july6.pdf](https://files.ontario.ca/hsw_rev_engaoda_webfinal_july6.pdf), p. 52.

2 See, for example: P. Sattler, *Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario’s Postsecondary Sector* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2011); <http://www.heqco.ca/en-ca/Research/ResPub/Pages/Work-Integrated-Learning-in-Ontario-s-Postsecondary-Sector-The-Pathways-of-Recent-College-and-University-Graduates.aspx>, pp. 3-4; Business Higher Education Roundtable, *BHER Submission: HUMA study on Experiential Learning and Pathways to Employment for Canadian Youth* (Ottawa: Business Council of Canada, n.d.); <http://bher.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/BHER-HUMA-June-1-2018-5b2.05d.pdf>, p. 2. The definition continues: “Work-integrated learning arrangements include the kinds of curriculum and pedagogic practices that can assist, provide and effectively integrate learning experiences in both educational and practice settings.”

3 Sattler, *Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario’s Postsecondary Sector*, p. 4.

4 Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow*, p. 26



Work-integrated learning or experiential learning has been singled out by advocates as being “critical to success in the area of skills development.”<sup>5</sup> Benefits to students are said to include improved prospects for employment, the development of marketable skills, increased self-confidence, and quality work experience.<sup>6</sup> According to Universities Canada, “through experiential learning, students are given the opportunity to apply theory to practice in real workplace settings, preparing them to enter the labour market with relevant occupational and soft skills, such as leadership, interpersonal relationship skills, effective communication skills, creativity, adaptability, entrepreneurial ability, teamwork and critical thinking. Students also develop a network of potential future employers.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in its advocacy, the Business Higher Education Roundtable has argued that WIL is “the most efficient and effective way to prepare Canada’s youth for the coming skills revolution” because WIL opportunities “introduce young people to potential new career paths, while providing businesses with access to new talent, energy and ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

Convinced of these advantages, advocates have argued that all students should have an opportunity to participate in WIL.<sup>9</sup> The Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel recommended that the province “commit to strengthening and expanding experiential learning opportunities across secondary, post-secondary, and adult learning environments” – and specially, that “Ontario should commit to ensuring that every student has at least one experiential learning opportunity by the end of secondary school... and at least one by the time they graduate from post-secondary education.”<sup>10</sup>

*Knowing more about the ways in which students combine their studies and employment can help clarify the context in which the current effort to expand WIL opportunities is unfolding.*

5 Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow*, p. 3.

6 Sattler, *Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario’s Postsecondary Sector*, pp. 5-6.

7 Universities Canada, *Study on Experiential Learning and Pathways to Employment for Canadian Youth: Supporting University Students to Succeed* (Universities Canada’s Submission to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities) (Ottawa: Universities Canada, March 2018); <https://www.univcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/study-on-experiential-learning-pathways-to-employment-for-cdn-youth-submission-march-2018.pdf>, p. 3.

8 Business Higher Education Roundtable, *BHER Submission: Pre-budget Consultations in Advance of Budget 2019* (Ottawa: Business Council of Canada, n.d.); [http://bher.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/BHER\\_pre-budget-submission\\_FINAL\\_Aug21.pdf](http://bher.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/BHER_pre-budget-submission_FINAL_Aug21.pdf), p. 3.

9 See, for instance, Business Higher Education Roundtable, *BHER Submission: Pre-budget Consultations in Advance of Budget 2019*.

10 Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow*, pp. 3-4.

Despite the attention that WIL is attracting and the benefits attributed to it, it remains unclear how many students are benefiting from such experiences, and how valuable they are. As the Business Higher Education Roundtable has observed, there is an absence of “relevant national data” on WIL; as a result, “we have no way of knowing exactly how many students are involved in school-to-work transition programs at Canadian post-secondary institutions.”<sup>11</sup>

In view of this, the purpose of this note is to present some new information about students’ work experiences while in PSE. The latest wave of the Longitudinal and International Survey of Adults (LISA) offers an opportunity to study the combination of work and study. Notably, the survey provides information on the employment held by prior and current postsecondary students during their education, and the percentage of those workers who pursue employment relating to their field of study.

These experiences do not necessarily constitute examples of WIL or experiential learning; but knowing more about the ways in which students combine their studies and employment can help clarify the context in which the current effort to expand WIL opportunities is unfolding.



11 Business Higher Education Roundtable, *Taking the Pulse of Work-Integrated Learning in Canada* (Ottawa: Business Council of Canada, n.d.); <http://bher.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/BHER-Academica-report-full.pdf>, p. 4; see pp. 55 ff.

# What the LISA data show

Statistics Canada reports that, during the 2016-17 academic year, 44 per cent of full-time students between the ages 18 to 24 were employed. This is slightly lower than the 47 per cent who were employed prior in 2007-08, prior to the onset of the last recession.<sup>12</sup>

This figure is somewhat lower than that reported for university students by the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC). According to the CUSC, in 2017, just over half (54 per cent) of middle-year university students worked while in school.<sup>13</sup> The CUSC figure is somewhat higher because the survey does not cover students at all universities or at colleges, while also including some part-time students.

Taken together, these two sources suggest that somewhere between 45 and 55 per cent of current Canadian postsecondary students are combining employment with their studies.

Survey figures such as these, however, provide a snapshot of whether a cohort of students is working during a given academic year, and not whether they have worked (or will work) at any point during postsecondary education. New figures from LISA address this, as the survey asked a representative group of Canadian adults (including some current students) whether they ever held a job during their postsecondary studies.<sup>14</sup>

According to LISA, three in four (75 per cent) of Canadians<sup>15</sup> report that they worked at some point during their postsecondary education. This includes 81 per cent of those studying at university, 70 per cent of those studying at college, and 64 of those in trades training.

Moreover, the LISA figures suggest that combining postsecondary studies and employment is becoming more common over time (at least, when looking further back than the ten years since the last recession). Just over 70 per cent of postsecondary graduates over the age of 40 report that they worked during their PSE, compared with 80 per cent of those in their 20s and 30s.

12 Dylan Saunders and Myriam Hazel, *Students in the Labour Market: Beyond the Recession* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2018); <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75-004-m/75-004-m2018002-eng.pdf?st=22q-cu-R>.

13 Prairie Research Associates, *Canadian University Survey Consortium 2017 Middle-Years University Student Survey: Master Report* (Winnipeg and Ottawa: Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2017); [http://www.cusc-ccreu.ca/publications/CUSC\\_2017%20Middle-Year%20Student%20Survey\\_Master%20Report%20\(English\)\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.cusc-ccreu.ca/publications/CUSC_2017%20Middle-Year%20Student%20Survey_Master%20Report%20(English)_FINAL.pdf). The 2014 survey reported similar findings, with 52 per cent of middle-year university students employed.

14 The LISA measures students who participated in work integrated learning opportunities across two groups. The first group collects information on those who had acquired their postsecondary education prior to 2014. The second group acquires this information on those who enrolled in PSE since 2014. To get the best results, this note combines both groups to get a general picture of the experiences of those who had previously participated in, and who are currently participating in, employment during their studies. Combining groups in this way provides a larger sample and the ability to explore whether the working experiences of students enrolled in PSE have changed over time. However, the data loses some of the precision needed to focus only on current students.

15 The values presented here and later in this report correspond to those respondents who provided valid responses to the LISA questionnaire items.

The next question to consider is whether the jobs that students hold while enrolled in PSE are likely to be related to their studies. Jobs that are related to a program of study come closer to resembling WIL, even if they may not always meet the strict definitions of work-integrated or experiential learning.

According to LISA, among those who held employment while pursuing their PSE, about half (48 per cent) say that at least one of the jobs they held was related to their studies or program. Note that this means that about 36 per cent<sup>16</sup> of all postsecondary students had a work experience in a job that was related to their studies or programs.

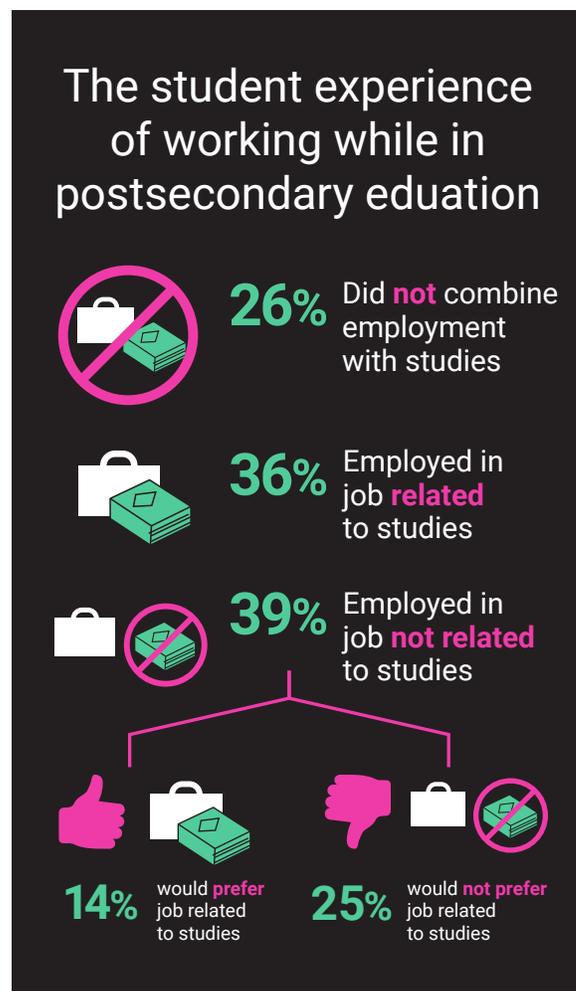
Students in trades training are more likely to say that the jobs they hold (or have held) are related to their studies (64 per cent), rather than those studying at college (48 per cent) or university (undergraduate) (45 per cent).

Of those who worked during PSE in a job that was not related to their studies or program, 36 per cent say they would have preferred to have a program-related job. This means that we can further describe the student experience of working while in PSE as follows<sup>17</sup> (figures do not add to 100 per cent due to rounding):

- » Those who do not hold employment during PSE: 26 per cent.
- » Those employed in a job related to their studies: 36 per cent.
- » Those employed in a job not related to their studies: 39 per cent.
  - » Those employed in a job not related to their studies, but would prefer a job related to their studies: 14 per cent.
  - » Those employed in a job not related to their studies, but would not prefer a job related to their studies: 25 per cent.

<sup>16</sup> Half of the three-quarters of students who worked while in PSE.

<sup>17</sup> Again, these figures capture the experiences of the current and former students who provided valid responses to each of the LISA's WIL questionnaire items.



This suggests that at least 14 per cent of PSE students have an unfulfilled demand for a WIL-type work experience (the figure could be slightly higher, as some of those who did not work at all may have preferred to work).

About half of those who worked as students also report that their job was useful not only for the income earned but also for the experience it provided as well. Specifically, 49 per cent say that a job they held during PSE provided them with the knowledge and experience they needed to help them obtain their first career-related job. Again, the proportion is higher for those in trades training (62 per cent) as opposed to those studying at college (50 per cent) or university (undergraduate) (48 per cent).

Note then that university students are more likely than other students to combine their studies with employment, but less likely to do so in a way that is relevant to their studies or that provides them with experience leading into their careers.

Interestingly, the results from the LISA indicate that while the experience of working while in PSE appears to be becoming somewhat more common over time, the proportion of working students whose jobs are related to their studies, or provide on-the-job experience for their future careers has remained more or less unchanged. If anything, a smaller proportion of current and recent graduates are likely to hold jobs that are relevant to their studies or careers than the proportions of those who graduated in previous decades.<sup>18</sup> It does not appear, then, that the recent emphasis on the importance of WIL has yet brought about a generalized shift in the types of jobs that students hold while enrolled in PSE.

Another important finding from LISA is that combining work and studies is not necessarily more common among students who need an edge heading into the labour market. A subset of the LISA respondents also participated in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), conducted in 2011-12, which included an assessment of literacy, numeracy and computer-based problem-solving skills. Students with higher literacy scores are more likely to work while in PSE than are students with lower scores – and the same is true for

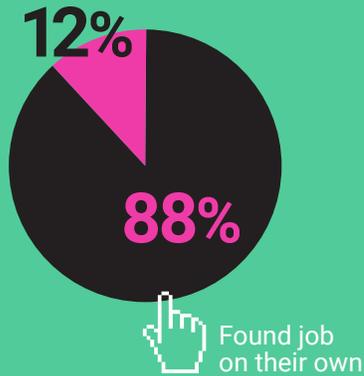
*The students most likely to participate in - and benefit from - these programs are also those students who are least likely to face difficulties transitioning into the labour force.*

<sup>18</sup> In comparison to those who do not hold jobs relevant to their studies or careers for each generation of respondents.

## Of students who worked during postsecondary education:



Matched with employer by their postsecondary institution



numeracy and problem-solving.

This is an important consideration for those involved in the design and delivery of programs such as those related to work-integrated learning. One challenge that such programs typically encounter is that the students most likely to participate in - and benefit from - these programs are also those students who are least likely to face difficulties transitioning into the labour force (as they have higher skill levels to begin with). This challenge is hardly unique to WIL – the difficulty in reaching people who are in the most need of help is a perennial one facing most social policy interventions.

As mentioned, 49 per cent of those who combined employment with their studies also report that their

job provided them with the knowledge and experience they needed to obtain their first career-related job. This question was asked, however, to all of those who combined work and studies, and not just to those who said they held a job related to their studies or program. Among only those who said they held a job during PSE that was in fact relevant to their studies, a much higher proportion (77 per cent) say that this job subsequently helped them land their first career-related job.

Finally, the LISA provides a number of additional details regarding students' employment experiences.

- » Among those who worked while in PSE, almost all (96 per cent) report that this was a paid job.
- » Most students who work while in PSE find their jobs on their own. Only 12 per cent report that their postsecondary institution helped to match them with an employer.
- » Among those students who worked and who say their employment was related to their studies, 39 per cent describe that job as a co-op or practicum. This suggests approximately 14 per cent of all postsecondary students have had a co-op or practicum experience (note that this includes students at all levels of PSE, including trades training, college and university).<sup>19</sup>
- » Among those students who worked and who say their employment was related to their studies, 69 per cent say they received credit for this work experience.

<sup>19</sup> Of all students, 75 per cent combined work and studies, of whom 48 per cent had jobs related to their studies, of whom 39 per cent said this was a coop or practicum:  $.75 \times .48 \times .39 = 14$  per cent.

These findings constitute a first look at the LISA data that has only recently been made available. Further research can be conducted to better understand the differences between students who work and those who don't, to learn more about students whose jobs are related to their studies, and to assess the impact, if any, of employment experiences during PSE on subsequent success in the labour market. This information can also be triangulated with that collected from other surveys of specific groups of students or institutions, to help confirm some impressions about current student experiences and raise questions about others.<sup>20</sup>

## Summary

The purpose of this note is to present some new information about students' work experiences while in postsecondary education. The new LISA data confirm that combining work and studies is a common experience for postsecondary students. However, fewer than two in five PSE students report holding a job while enrolled that is related to their studies. Moreover, there appears to have been no increase in the proportion of students saying the jobs they hold while in PSE are relevant to their studies or provide them with experience leading into their careers. Finally, students with higher literacy, numeracy and problem-solving scores are more likely to work while in PSE than are students with lower scores. As is the case with many social programs, a challenge facing programs designed to provide WIL or experiential learning opportunities is that the students most likely to participate in them may be those least likely to face difficulties transitioning into the labour force.

*A challenge facing programs designed to provide WIL or experiential learning opportunities is that the students most likely to participate in them may be those least likely to face difficulties transitioning into the labour force.*

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the information presented in Business Higher Education Roundtable, *Taking the Pulse of Work-Integrated Learning in Canada*.

