

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

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Introduction

As the voice of Canada's universities at home and abroad, Universities Canada welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities study on the way in which experiential learning can guide younger Canadians through the transitions between high school, postsecondary education and the labour market.

Canadian and international labour markets are going through a period of change at an unprecedented pace, driven by technological advancements, automation, demographic shift and continued globalization. These changes are transforming the way we work as well as the skills and educational requirements of the labour force, with more jobs requiring higher levels of skill and postsecondary degrees.

According to OECD 2017 data, Canada continues to do better than most countries when it comes to youth participation in the workforce. The employment rate of Canadian youth 15 to 24 years old stands at 56.5 per cent compared to 45.7 per cent in Germany, 50.3 per cent in the US, and an OECD average of 40.8 per cent. But, we can do better and must act now to position Canada for future success.

Ensuring all Canadians can participate in, and effectively adjust to, changes in the labour market will be essential to Canadian prosperity. There is a need to examine how – across sectors and with government support – we can best prepare Canada's youth for the future.

To help explore the innovations required to navigate the future of work, Universities Canada, in partnership with the Rideau Hall Foundation, recently brought partners together for a national forum called *Univation*. Students joined with leaders from government, business and civil society in exploring best practices for innovation in teaching and learning to prepare Canada's young people for the future. Key takeaways from this forum include: removing barriers to inclusion to prepare graduates for the workforce of tomorrow; responding through innovative education and experiential learning programs both at home and abroad; and collaborating across all sectors to truly prepare graduates for success.

Helping students transition from education to the labour force through experiential learning is an established practice in Canada. The University of Waterloo pioneered the original co-op model in Canada over 60 years ago, and universities across the country have since expanded their approach to hands-on learning to include co-ops,



internships, research projects, mentorship programs, service learning and international learning experiences.

As the nature of work changes, so is experiential learning. Universities continue to be at the forefront of innovative new approaches giving students the skills they need for success. Making work-integrated learning a fundamental part of the Canadian undergraduate experience is one of several commitments recently made by Canada's Business Higher Education Roundtable – an organization which aims to strengthen partnerships among universities, colleges, polytechnics and private-sector employers. More than half of today's university undergraduates benefit from experiential learning opportunities such as co-ops, internships and service learning as part of their university education. But demand for these opportunities outstrips supply. BHER has set a national goal of 100 per cent of Canadian postsecondary students benefiting from some form of meaningful work-integrated learning before graduation.

To help our youth navigate the changing nature of work, Universities Canada recommends:

- That the government double investment in the SWILP program, thereby engaging more employer partners across sectors and benefiting students across all disciplines in order to meet the 100 per cent target set by BHER;
- The creation of a pan-Canadian global education strategy with a target to increase the percentage of Canadian postsecondary students who participate in learning abroad opportunities to 25 per cent within 10 years.

Experiential learning: a bridge between education and work

Experiential learning opportunities provide a bridge between education and work – benefiting students, employers and institutions. 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.

Employers benefit by having a reliable supply of skilled workers who can quickly function as productive members of the workforce. Experiences like co-ops and internships also provide employers with the opportunity to evaluate potential new hires, providing a window into their future labour force.



Universities benefit through increased connections with employers who provide institutions with valuable insights into curriculum and program re-design. Experiential learning placements also allow universities to be more successful in attracting, retaining and engaging students, by equipping them with the knowledge and skills that employers demand.

Universities are responding to today's disrupted and quickly evolving knowledge economy. Across the country, universities such as Simon Fraser University, the University of Ottawa, the University of Waterloo and the Université de Sherbrooke are committed to expanding and innovating experiential learning opportunities to support youth as they transition to a labour force impacted by significant global shifts. The programs below illustrate how some universities are helping students bridge from their education to the work force. We would be pleased to provide more examples on request.

Carleton University and **Shopify**, a cloud-based commerce platform designed for businesses, have created a one-of-a-kind program that provides students with free tuition and a salary while they learn on the job. Students split their time between the university's campus and Shopify's downtown Ottawa headquarters. They learn course concepts at Shopify by joining teams and contributing to projects, in addition to taking theoretical courses and electives at Carleton University.

Change Lab at **Simon Fraser University** is an immersive one-term program that empowers student to become changemakers, teaching them hands-on skills they need to create social change. Instructors from both SFU and the community deliver classes in a non-traditional, deeply experiential format. Classes feature mentorship and skills-based workshops in a collaborative studio environment. Change Lab is a collaboration between SFU's Beedie School of Business and Faculty of Environment.

The University of Ottawa's Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Social Innovation Option is a series of interdisciplinary classes that can be integrated into all BA and BSc programs in the Faculty of Arts. This business-arts connection program teaches creativity and innovation to arts and science students. The program is designed to cultivate team-building, look at different methods of inquiry and explore entrepreneurship with creativity and reflexive thinking.

An innovative course offered at the **University of Calgary** allows English majors to apply their expertise and interest in literature to a real-world setting. Students in the course "Community Engagement Through Literature" design, implement and lead activities for the Calgary Public Library's "Homework Help" literacy and learning



program for elementary school pupils. Weekly volunteering sessions at a library branch are coupled with on-campus seminars where students learn about service learning, make recommendations to enhance the program and reflect on the relationship between literary studies and public service.

Federal support for work-integrated learning

While these examples demonstrate how universities are providing students with innovative approaches to experiential learning, the federal government has a role to play in insuring all students benefit from these experiences, equipping them with the skills and experiences they need to succeed in the workforce of the future.

Canada needs a sustained national vision and an ambitious experiential learning strategy to support our young people and ensure their future success. We must build on Canadian excellence in higher education, pedagogy and technology to harness the talent and potential of Canadian youth.

Recommendation 1: Increase experiential learning opportunities for all students

Universities Canada welcomed the investments made in Budget 2017 of \$221 million over five years towards Mitacs' goal of providing 10,000 work-integrated learning placements for Canadian postsecondary students and graduates each year. We also applauded the federal government Student Work Integrated Program which will create 10,000 paid student work placements over the next four years and facilitate stronger partnerships between employers and partnering universities, polytechnics and colleges.

But with technological disruption changing the world of work, there is now a new urgency. Student demand for quality experiential learning experiences, such as co-ops, internships, research projects and mentorship programs – all of which could include international experience – continues to grow and outpace supply. Currently, 55 percent of Canadian undergraduate university students participate in such experiences.

We support the call by BHER for access to work-integrated learning for 100 per cent of Canadian postsecondary students. To achieve this goal, further collaboration and action is required by governments, universities and employers to ensure these career-boosting opportunities are created. Getting to 100 per cent will require investment on the part of business and government, and improvements to university practices.



Given today's complex multi-disciplinary problems and the disruptive changing nature of work, all students, across all disciplines, need the opportunity to have experiential learning experiences. We must expand best practices and successful programs, like Mitacs and SWILP, to be more inclusive.

Mitacs, a national, not-for-profit organization that designs and delivers research and training programs, plays a vital role in developing the next generation of innovators in Canada. In 2007, its program offerings became open to all disciplines, but these experiences are not yet available to undergraduate students. Federal support for postsecondary graduates, graduate researchers and postdoctoral fellows in select fields are important steps in the right direction. However, more could be done to expand this successful program and provide undergraduate students with a chance to gain the broad range of skills and experiences that employers are demanding. Employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises who struggle with the financial barriers to offering these types of opportunities, will benefit by working with highly-skilled undergraduate students who can help them solve problems and develop innovative solutions.

With investments in advancing equity and diversity, the 2018 federal budget highlights the government's commitment to ensure equal opportunities for all Canadians and increasing diversity in research by improving support for women, under-represented groups and early-career researchers.

The government's efforts in advancing equity and diversity align with Canadian universities' recent adoption of [seven principles on equity, diversity and inclusion](#) and Universities Canada's [action plan for inclusive excellence](#). The action plan outlines activities for universities to promote investments in the K-12 pipeline, in student aid, mobility and work-integrated learning opportunities, scholarships, research grants and programming to enhance and scale-up progress in achieving inclusive excellence.

Yet, we note that the government's SWILP is currently limited to postsecondary students in science, technology, engineering, math and business programs. Half of undergraduate students are in the social sciences and humanities. Canada cannot afford to leave half of its young talent behind. In addition, although the SWILP program provides extra incentive for employers to recruit under-represented groups, such as women in STEM, Indigenous students and people with disabilities, these groups currently enrol in STEM programs at a lower rate. For example, women remain less likely to choose a career in STEM areas, making up only 15 per cent of bachelor student enrolment in computer science, and 20 per cent in engineering enrolment. And while efforts to increase under-represented groups in



STEM are welcome, expanding the SWILP program to include all disciplines will mean that more students from marginalized groups, independent of their area of study, will have an opportunity to benefit from the program.

Further, liberal arts students are increasingly in demand in tech and other sectors leading the way through this time of economic disruption. In a new book titled *The Future Computed*, Microsoft president Brad Smith and executive vice president of AI and research, Harry Shum, say that the liberal arts will be critical to unleashing the full potential of artificial intelligence.

They argue that, “as computers behave more like humans, the social sciences and humanities will become even more important. Languages, art, history, economics, ethics, philosophy, psychology and human development courses can teach critical, philosophical and ethics-based skills that will be instrumental in the development and management of AI solutions.”

Therefore, Universities Canada recommends the government double investments in the SWILP program, thereby engaging more employer partners across sectors and benefiting students across all disciplines in order to meet the 100 per cent goal set by BHER.

Recommendation 2: Expanding international education

International study experiences and hands-on research opportunities give students the problem-solving, creative thinking and global competencies employers want. A new report, *Global Education for Canadians: Equipping Young Canadians to Succeed at Home & Abroad*,¹ argues that Canada’s competitiveness depends on a dramatic increase in international study and that it is failing to prepare young people for a rapidly changing world.

The independent group of educational leaders, business executives and policy experts emphasizes that global education can be an instrument for achieving national priorities including a dynamic workforce, an inclusive and open society and a country with global connections and influence. International learning benefits not just our students but also our society. Learning abroad provides students with knowledge, skills and global connections that are essential for their success and Canada’s future.

¹ Report of the Study Group on Global Education, *Global Education for Canadians: Equipping Young Canadians to Succeed at Home & Abroad*, 2017.



Many other countries have already recognized the importance of international education. In France and Germany about one third of students study abroad as part of their degree, and in the U.S. the figure is 19 per cent. But in Canada, only 11 per cent of postsecondary students gain international experience. When it comes to equipping our young people with global skills and competencies, Canada is falling behind its competitor nations.

Studies have found that international education is associated with higher degree-completion rates, academic scores and employment rates². It also fosters 21st century skills – problem-solving, communication and teamwork, as well as resilience, adaptability and creativity, especially among students from less-advantaged backgrounds.

[The global education report](#) calls for a pan-Canadian global education strategy with ambitious national targets led by the federal government, but based on partnership between federal, provincial and territorial governments, educational institutions and the private sector. It proposes the formation of a representative Global Education Leadership Council and a “Go Global Canada” investment fund. The Canadian global education strategy would prioritize emerging regions and countries, offer significant support for language and cultural training and boost participation from disadvantaged and under-represented groups in international education.

The targets include increasing the percentage of Canadian students participating in international study, co-ops and internships, from 11 to 25 per cent within 10 years, with emphasis on improving the access and participation of Indigenous youth and those from marginalized groups.

Canada’s future global competitiveness and prosperity depends upon developing business, political and civic leaders who are internationally aware and globally connected. There are truly no greater emissaries than our young people for positioning Canada as a global leader.

Therefore, Universities Canada recommends the creation of a pan-Canadian global education strategy with a target to increase the percentage of Canadian postsecondary students who participate in learning abroad opportunities to 25 per cent within 10 years.

²Report of the Study Group on Global Education, *Global Education for Canadians: Equipping Young Canadians to Succeed at Home & Abroad*, 2017.



Conclusion

Governments, employers and postsecondary institutions all have a role to play in enhancing and expanding opportunities for students to take part in experiential learning activities. There are challenges in getting to scale, however. Many more students want to take part in experiential learning opportunities, at home or abroad. Universities across the country are committed to helping all students, including students from marginalized groups, across all disciplines, find placements.

Taking action on the student experience is urgent. The experiences students receive today will shape Canada for the next 50 years.

Universities Canada would be glad to provide further detail on any of the above recommendations. We look forward to participating at the forthcoming HUMA committee meeting on Experiential Learning and Pathways to Employment for Canadian Youth.

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