

Future Skills Centre Podcast

Episode 5: Bridging the Gap Between Education and Work – WIL

Canada ranks among the top countries in the world in terms of its rates of postsecondary education attainment as well as annual spending per postsecondary student. While a majority of education providers believe that our graduates are well-equipped for the workforce, a much lower proportion of students and employers share that belief.

This points to a disconnect between the education and work worlds, one that could be bridged by incorporating real-world or experiential work into students' education. The Business + Higher Education Roundtable aims to do just that, by ensuring that 100% of Canadian postsecondary students participate in a form of work-integrated learning before graduation. In our fifth episode of Season 1 of the Future Skills Centre podcast, we speak to Valerie Walker (Business Higher + Education Roundtable), Matthew McKean (The Conference Board of Canada), and Kevin O'Meara (The Conference Board of Canada) to address some of these issues.

Timestamps

03:53 - 16:46 Valerie Walker
17:54 - 23:11 Kevin O'Meara
24:10 - 29:16 Matthew McKean

Links

Future Skills Centre and Conference Board of Canada links, such as recommended articles and webpages, social media handles, etc.

Future Skills Centre Homepage:
<https://fsc-ccf.ca/>

Future Skills Centre Twitter:
https://twitter.com/fsc_ccf_en

The Conference Board of Canada Homepage:
<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/>

The Conference Board of Canada Twitter:
<https://twitter.com/ConfBoardofCda>

The Conference Board of Canada Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/ConferenceBoardofCanada/>

**Business Higher Education
Roundtable Homepage:**
<http://bher.ca/>

**Are Canada's Business Schools Teaching
Social and Emotional Skills? (Paper
Authored by Matthew McKean):**
<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/edu/research/are-canadas-business-schools-teaching-social-and-emotional-skills>

Transcript

Heather McIntosh:

Hi listeners. Before we begin, we just want to acknowledge that this episode was recorded prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada. As you well know, this virus has had a dramatic effect on Canadian's ability to go to work and access training and education among so many other things. The conversations and opinions you will be hearing do not address COVID-related challenges specifically but are meant to provide instructive insights into how we can better prepare for the future of work more broadly. We hope you enjoy this episode.

Welcome to the Future Skills Center Podcast presented by the Conference Board of Canada. I'm your host, Heather McIntosh. As a member of the education and skills team at the Conference Board of Canada, my colleagues and I are constantly looking ahead, gaining and sharing insights into the labor market of today and the future. Together with our partners, we inform and support local approaches to skills development and employment training to help Canadians transition in the changing economy. The Future Skills Center is a consortium made up of the Conference Board of Canada, Blueprint and Ryerson University. Together, we're building a center that strives for research excellence and evidence generation.

Like countries across the globe, Canada is facing wide-reaching demographic and technological changes that pose increasingly significant challenges to the world of work. In season one of the Future Skills Center Podcast presented by the Conference Board of Canada, we will explore some of the most crucial emerging challenges to the future of work. Each episode will unpack a unique challenge facing Canadians.

Work-integrated learning is a type of experiential education that merges a student's academic studies with a workplace or practical setting. It can happen at the course or program level and includes the development of learning

outcomes related to employability and lifelong learning. Work-integrated learning programs have been implemented around the world in many different formats. Some call them co-ops, apprenticeships or internships and can be of varying lengths. Some involve hands on learning while others take place remotely. Some involve, for example, working on policy work for the government facilitated by a university connection while others could involve working on software at a small private enterprise.

No matter what one's work-integrated learning experience looks like, this form of training has been proven to be one of the best ways to develop technical skills, social and emotional skills, and a desire to continuously learn through the course of one's life. But what does the development of work-integrated learning programs look like in practice? What is unique about the Canadian context compared to other world leaders in the work-integrated learning space? What are the benefits of work-integrated learning programs to individual organizations, students, and the economy? And how can we ensure that relevant players work together to show the values of coordinate and optimize work-integrated learning programs for all Canadians? I'll tackle these questions and more in this episode of the Future Skills Center Podcast presented by the Conference Board of Canada on work-integrated learning.

To answer these questions, I spoke with Valerie Walker, who's based in Ottawa, Ontario. She's the CEO of the Business/Higher Education Roundtable, which is an organization that aims to strengthen cooperation between employers and educators. One of their initiatives is their work-integrated learning mandate from the Government of Canada, which has set a goal of ensuring that all students in Canada have a work-integrated learning experience during their first diploma, degree or certificate. To start off our convo, Val gave me a quick high level overview of the Business/Higher Education Roundtable.

Valerie Walker:

The Business/Higher Education Roundtable, we affectionately refer to it as BHER for short, is a fantastic organization. And it really is unique, one of a kind in Canada. It was founded by the Business Council of Canada in 2015. The Business Council's members are CEOs from some of Canada's largest companies, and they identified a need to work more closely with leaders from the education sector, and they didn't have a mechanism to do that.

And so the Business/Higher Education Roundtable was created initially as a pilot to see whether leaders from industry could come together and collaborate and co-create programs or initiatives that would make Canada better and stronger with leaders from the education sector. And we were incubated within the Business Council for nearly four years. And I'm happy to say that as of March 2019, we formally incorporated and spun out from the Business Council into our own national not-for-profit. And we've been thriving ever since. Our members are CEOs from big companies like TELUS and RBC, and many others as well as institutions from across the country.

Heather McIntosh:

And so where does work-integrated learning come into the discussion about BHER?

Valerie Walker:

The members of BHER wanted to find one big signature initiative that would really showcase the type of work they wanted BHER to take on. And it became clear very early, the first major initiative that made sense and was a top priority for members, both from the employer side, as well as the education side was getting students better prepared to enter the workplace. And to do that, they identified work-integrated learning. Things like co-ops and internships. Also, things like apprenticeships or applied research projects to get students, quote unquote, "real-world experience". And think about what they're learning in the classroom, how it's applied outside of the classroom. And with my members, you go big or you go home. And so the initiative really centered around getting every single student, 100% of Canadian students, a chance for a work experience before they finish school.

Heather McIntosh:

So Val, what is the Business/Higher Education Roundtable's mandate with regards to work-integrated learning?

Valerie Walker:

When it comes to work-integrated learning, or we often just say WIL, the Business/Higher Education Roundtable is committed to ensuring that every student in their first diploma or degree at a Canadian institution has some opportunity to have a work experience before they finish school by 2028.

Heather McIntosh:

So what is a work experience?

Valerie Walker:

It's a great question, Heather. So it's really important, especially for BHER that people understand the breadth and the value of work-integrated learning opportunities beyond what most people would think of in terms of a full co-op. So a co-op would be a four month placement where the student is not in class at all and working full time for a company. That is prohibited for a lot of employers to pay for and to find a full time work, enough work for a student to make it meaningful over that period of time. And it's more expensive.

So for us work-integrated learning is co-op, the formal what both people think of. It's also an applied research project where a real-life business challenge is identified and brought into the classroom for students to work on in groups. So it's not just a stale case study from 10 years ago. It's a real-life challenge that maybe a small local business has with respect to marketing or launching a new product. And students, for example, in a marketing class can take that real-world experience, come up with pitches and then have a chance to pitch them to the employer at the end of the semester or term and have the best project actually be the solution for the business. It's also things like a research internship, the value in the opportunity to get to 100% of students having some type of this work experience requires us to think more broadly about the definition and we're really focused on that.

Heather McIntosh:

Val, what is Work-Integrated Learning?

Valerie Walker:

There are a lot of definitions if you look in academic literature, but at BHER, we've really tried to simplify what it means to us in what we're trying to create. And so from our perspective, Work-Integrated Learning or WIL comes down to having a valuable experience for the student, by which we mean they're applying something they've learned in the classroom outside of the classroom, and that they have an opportunity to reflect on and think about that experience and how it relates back into the work that's taking place in the classroom that's that integration piece.

It needs to provide value, I think is a better way to say it for the employer, whether that doesn't mean IP, it doesn't mean a new billion dollar company idea, but some value that is not just a thing. You hear the horror stories about a student sitting in a cubicle off in the corner making coffee or people I don't think fax things anymore but doing that type of thing. And then have the institutions involved to make sure that the professors or teachers are bringing those concepts back and talking about them in the classroom. So it has to be providing value to all three of the major players, the student, the employer, and the educator.

Heather McIntosh:

There's a lot of discussion about Work-Integrated Learning in the context of the future of work. Could you elaborate on your thoughts related to that?

Valerie Walker:

Sure. And I always, I get that question a lot, especially given my role on the Future Skills Council. I usually joke and say, "No one has a crystal ball in terms of what the future of work looks like and if they do, they should definitely let people know because there's a moneymaking idea there for sure." But I think what we do know for sure when it comes to what employers are looking at and how work is going to change is that at the core, generally speaking students are graduating with high quality technical skills,

competencies, and knowledge that set them up for success in where, because we don't know exactly where work is going or what exactly those technical skills will be in the future that are most valuable to employers. There needs to be an increased focus on the social and emotional skills or these human skills. And in so doing no matter what the future requires of students as they transition into the workplace comes with respected the technical skills.

If they have things like negotiation skills, communication skills, working in a team, problem solving that allows them to be more resilient. And that's the key buzzword these days, but it is critical employers increasingly say they want people, new hires, recent grads, and current employees to be able to change and adapt more quickly as the future of work changes. So really focusing on those social-emotional skills is gonna be key for the future of work.

Heather McIntosh:

Val, what is the true value add of Work-Integrated Learning for students today?

Valerie Walker:

There are a lot of things that are valuable about it, but I will say honestly and truthfully and with such sincerity, and our chair right now, Dave McKay talked about this, WIL can be a social equalizer in this country. In the past, yes, students get skills in the workplace. They understand how business works, they understand what value they can bring to the workplace that is critical. All of us know either from experience or someone who knows someone, that's how you get into the workplace sometimes, "Oh, I know a guy who can put you in touch with."

And so having exposure to employers as a student, every single student, that computer science student from University of Waterloo, that liberal arts student from Lethbridge, if every student gets that type of access and growing a network before they're done school, that transition for them into the workforce and there's data to back this up is smoother. And that is

why we talk about 100% of students, we mean everyone. We want to provide an opportunity for every student to get access to the same quality jobs.

Heather McIntosh:

Why are you personally passionate about Work-Integrated Learning?

Valerie Walker:

Heather, I can give you the stats about why WIL is important for students and how it helps them get a footing into their career. But I have to say, I'll give you a really specific example, BHER walks the talk, when it comes to Work-Integrated Learning. We had two students join us for internships in the summer and they're fantastic. And one of them, his name's Liam, was finishing his accounting degree at Carleton University. And throughout the summer working with us, decided that he also wanted to expand what he was doing to incorporate public administration. And so to see actually in real terms with a real person, the impact that having a quality experience has on their thinking about their future is pretty powerful. Liam, I should say, graduated in December and is now working with us full time and is helping us, of course with our financials, but also is thinking about product development for the types of things that employers can use to make it easier for them to increase the number of WIL placements they can offer.

And I think without Liam's WIL opportunity with BHER in the summer, maybe his path wouldn't have been the same and maybe he's going to find his true passion a bit sooner in life, which you can't really beat that. So when it comes to why I'm super passionate about WIL, it's really I see it every day, we have students in our offices. We have done that since we started, just so that we're walking the talk, to see the real impact it has on students' lives, not in a up in the cloud sense, but in a real tangible way is fantastic. And the other thing that's great about WIL is those students are having, I would say an equal amount of impact on us and bringing their ideas to us in the same way that we're helping provide some new experiences for them. And the benefit

that has not just for the student then, but for the employer, the employee, and the whole company is a win-win.

Heather McIntosh:

Val, could you tell me how the Business Higher Education Roundtable's Work-Integrated Learning initiatives turned into a national strategy?

Valerie Walker:

Yeah, absolutely Heather and it's kind of a funny story. So it was the week before I started at the Business Council that members of BHER had committed to their goal for 100% of students to get some kind of WIL before they finished school. And so when I showed up, that was my first major task to take on, figure out how to achieve that. And I will say it took a couple of years building momentum, getting some early wins. And then really the momentum started in fall of 2018, where BHER identified the top priorities we thought that the federal government would be able to get involved with to help scale the activity and the initiative that we had seeded at BHER. And over the course of, I would say six months BHER found 25 national organizations and associations that bought into our push to have the federal government get involved more heavily than they already were when it came to Work-Integrated Learning. And so the way we say it is we really started to help create and lead a parade of many industry associations, post-secondary associations, student associations, all saying, "There's a role here for the federal government to step up and help what started, really scale, and go to the next level."

And I'm quite happy to say that the federal government responded in spades in their budget in March of 2019. They committed money to BHER that allowed us to scale our activities. And they contributed a significant, almost \$800 million into scaling WIL activity around the country. And so really at the crux of it for BHER was ensuring that everyone, from all of the different stakeholder groups across the country, were on the same page and went to the government with the same plan and made it easy for them to say yes.

Heather McIntosh:

Val gave me a lot of food for thought. Work integrated learning isn't just about convincing young students to apply for co-ops, apprenticeships and internships. It requires a holistic approach to the way that governments, post-secondary institutions and students of all ages cooperate with one another. This restructuring of Canada's training system won't happen on its own. So it's great to know that organizations like the Business/Higher Education Roundtable are working alongside industry, education and government leaders to transform what it means to learn and work in our country.

As our post-secondary education system is constantly changing, it is also important to hear from younger voices about their work integrated learning experiences, both positive and negative. I speak next with Kevin O'Meara, a researcher with the Conference Board of Canada. We spoke about his time doing a work integrated learning experience as a first generation university student. Kevin gave me perspective on the struggles of being a Humanities and Social Sciences student, trying to enter the working world. And also spoke candidly about how younger people perceive themselves in relation to the future of work.

Kevin, could you describe your career trajectory?

Kevin O'Meara:

Absolutely Heather. So, I've had a pretty disjointed career trajectory so far. Out of high school I worked in a number of kitchens, in cafes and in grocery stores. And I think to some extent, I've really embodied the millennial experience. Neither of my parents had gone to post-secondary educational institutions, and neither had even graduated high school. So I feel like I was really testing myself to see if education really was the key to upward social mobility. I had joined University in a dual program with Philosophy and Political Science and had also registered to go through a co-op experience, hoping to apply some of the concepts I learned in school to work experiences.

One of the first barriers I had noticed was that there were no employers looking for philosophy students. And this is at least anecdotally an experience I found, I share with a lot of Humanities students. I feel like employers don't recognize the skill sets, especially social emotional skills and analytical skills, that are offered by people who are in programs like Philosophy and History instead opting for more Social Sciences minded people. So instead I had to apply for co-op through the Political Science Program, but even that was fraught with a number of challenges.

At the very beginning of the co-op process, I needed to answer a large series of modules and questionnaires, mostly asking questions about what it's like being in the working world and how to prepare yourself for being in an office environment. And one of the main limitations was that if you received less than seven out of 10 correct answers, on one of the 10 or so modules, you were automatically disqualified from doing co-op for the rest of your university career. So one morning I was just doing these online tests as a teenager. And unfortunately I only got six out of 10 right on one of the modules about something like Workplace Synergy. It was very jargon filled if I may say so. And I was just automatically disqualified from doing any Work-Integrated Learning experiences for the rest of my university career.

Of course you can chalk that up to me being a somewhat naive teenager, who maybe wasn't putting in 110% on answering these questionnaires. But at the same time, I think that ended up completely changing the trajectory of what my academic career was going to be. There's a lot of discussion around whether or not universities are meant to prepare people for the so-called external labor markets, or if as a humanities-oriented students, I was only preparing myself for a life in academia.

And that was a really early negative experience that I had that I'm sure a lot of other people around my age have shared regarding the connection of university students and the working

world. Fortunately, I'm now doing a Masters degree in Political Science, and it was through that, that I was able to get this Work-Integrated Learning experience. And it's been a much, much better process overall. And I find that I'm actually really well able to apply the concepts that I learned in my undergrad and master's studies in an actual working world context.

Heather McIntosh:

Kevin, as a person who's early on in their career, would you recommend Work-Integrated learning opportunities for your peers?

Kevin O'Meara:

I think it's become sort of a common sense notion recently that a lot of people are struggling compared to their parents, who didn't necessarily have to have the same level of experience and academic training that we have to, to have a life that's as comfortable as theirs were. But I think I'd recommend a co-op program to anyone, regardless of whatever program they're in. Because it opens your minds to a lot of alternative experiences that you wouldn't have really gotten through conventional academic training. Because no matter what you're gonna be receiving alternative challenges and a completely different environment that you usually get in the academic experience.

I've personally gained a bunch of technical skills that I didn't get in university. I'm constantly working with my French every day. I'm using a bunch of new technologies and working with statistics. And maybe most importantly, I'm working with people a lot more. Which is something that isn't really explicitly tested and developed in the university setting. To put it another way, I feel like I'm learning a number of social and emotional skills. Like collaborating with people, working in teams, communication that I didn't really experience in the somewhat regimented and individualist university setting. So it's really important to make the Work-Integrated Learning experience a little bit more open, less rigid, because a lot of the time people

are so much more complicated than what's on their resume. And people have so many more skills than anything that you could write down on a single piece of paper.

Heather McIntosh:

After my conversation with Kevin, it seems as though Work-Integrated Learning is even more complex than one might imagine. How can we ensure that systems are in place to not leave students behind? And if each student gets Work-Integrated Learning experience, how can we ensure that it is a quality job that will benefit, not only the employer, but the worker in the short and long term? And, how can we cater appropriate Work-Integrated Learning experiences to the hundreds of different programs that are preparing future workers for the increasingly varied jobs of the future? To answer these questions from an informed researchers perspective, I spoke to Matt McKean. Matt leads Research Business Development and Stakeholder Relations for the Conference Board of Canada's Education Skills Team. And he's also a part of the team leading the Future Skill Center.

I spoke with Matt first about his experience in Academia and research and why Work-Integrated Learning has become such a critical part of the future skills conversation. Matt, I understand that some of the research currently being undertaken by the Conference Board of Canada on behalf of the Future Skills Centre, seeks to look at how to bridge the gap between education and work. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Matthew McKean:

Stage one we assessed the absorptive capacity in Canada to increase Work-Integrated Learning. The next phase is to do some focus groups to figure out what small, medium, and potentially large organizations need to increase that capacity.

Heather McIntosh:

And what could that result in, for example, phase two. What are you looking to bring out from those focus groups?

Matthew McKean:

Sure, we think we need to build a WIL toolkit. For lack of a better word, a WIL in a box. We need to figure out what are the tools that small, medium and large organizations need to bring more students on, more learners on, into the workplace. So that would be toolkits around how to mentor students, how to provide them with a quality Work-Integrated Learning experience. What skills to try to provide those students with while they're on the job.

Heather McIntosh:

Matt, it seems like there's a lot of interest in Canada right now around Work-Integrated Learning. Could you describe why that is warranted or maybe it's not warranted?

Matthew McKean:

No, it's definitely warranted. It's the biggest phenomena I think in skills training in Canada right now, and in many ways dwarfs the future skill center work that we're doing. So, just in terms of the amount of money that's been put in this space and the range of partners who have been mobilized to support it. So, it's an employer driven demand, really. Employers emphatically said through surveys and feedback through the Business Council of Canada that they're not getting graduates with the skills they need, new graduates, new hires I should say, with the skills they need. Both in terms of the social emotional and the technical. But especially the social emotional skills. And the realization there was, how can they get it? Well, it's through applied experiential learning. They can't acquire those skills in a postsecondary program alone. They need to enter the workforce at some point during their training or have some kind of experience that at least emulates a real-world applied work environment in order to help them develop those skills. So that underpins the demand for Work-Integrated Learning.

Heather McIntosh:

Matt, why are you interested in this work? Why are you interested in research pertaining to Work-Integrated Learning and experiential learning in Canada?

Matthew McKean:

Sure, it's critical to the future skills conversation. So, the long-term prosperity economic strength of Canada is dependent on our talent pipeline. And the universities and colleges and polytechnics plays such a big role and a key role in training and the labor market outcomes for young people, and increasingly mid-career workers and older workers who will need to be re-skilled. And Work-Integrated Learning is clearly and decidedly a key part of that conversation. It poses a number of really interesting research questions along the way, because it's not as straightforward or simple as saying, "Get everybody a new co-op opportunity and that will solve the problems. And that will translate immediately to a job."

So, this is one of those big wicked problems I think in Canada that has sectorial and regional implications. And then also touches on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion and how do we increase the accessibility to Work-Integrated Learning for non-traditional students and vulnerable populations? How do we transition the whole Work-Integrated Learning? Or how do we build on it beyond the capacity that's already there and some of the traditional programs that lend themselves more easily to Work-Integrated Learning and build them out for humanities and social science students, or students with disabilities. I think that's one of the wicked problems within a larger wicked problem. So that's what's really inspiring for me.

Heather McIntosh:

How does work integrated learning fit within the future skills conversation?

Matthew McKean:

Yeah, I often say it's the future skills and work integrated learning are the two biggest phenomenon in the skills space right now. And I think they go hand in hand. The skills, the future skills that we're all looking for, everybody's looking for this holy grail or this list of what are the future skills everybody needs to have, so that we can just train everybody for them and we'll be good to go. I don't think that exists or will exist, though as soon as we have it there'll be a new set. And what we really need to do is train graduates, train people to be resilient and adaptable and collaborative and have skills that are transferable.

And I think work integrated learning is a vehicle for that. And in many ways it's a parable for what we do once we get on the job anyway, which is to learn through work and to continue learning. And so, I think one of the big takeaways or the biggest skill that everybody needs is lifelong learning and the realization that that's the key and will be the key to our own resilience and weathering labor market changes. And so, working at Great Learning is a way to embed that kind of skill or that kind of thinking and behavior in young people at an early age.

Heather McIntosh:

Matt's questions won't be easy to answer, and even when we get the answers, they may be unexpected and likely leads to even more challenging questions, but that's all part of the importance and the excitement of this research. To keep up to date on the work being done by the Conference Board of Canada on behalf of the Future Skill Center, focused on work integrated learning, visit our website at conferenceboard.ca/futureskillcenter. It's important to note that even when we achieve 100% work integrated learning in Canada, some people will unfortunately still be left behind.

People who don't seek post-secondary training after high school, and those who enter training programs for jobs that are less in demand may be left behind. In our next and final episode of the first season of the Future Skill Center podcast presented by the Conference Board of Canada, we will be speaking about the gig economy in Canada, chatting about the laws, technological changes and on the ground experiences that are fundamentally changing what it means to work in Canada. Until then, if you're enjoying the podcast, why not share it with a friend or colleague who would enjoy it too? You can subscribe through your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And let's keep working toward a better future for all Canadians.

The Future Skill Center podcast is presented by the Conference Board of Canada, and hosted by me, Heather McIntosh. It is produced by Noah Snyderman and Kevin O'Meara. At the Conference Board of Canada, we master complexity through our trusted research and unparalleled connections, delivering unique insight into Canada's toughest problems so leaders and communities can build a stronger future. Learn more about us and our work at conferenceboard.ca. We are a proud consortium partner of the Future Skill Center, which is a Pan-Canadian initiative, connecting ideas and innovations generated across Canada so that employees and employers can succeed in the labor market, and to ensure that local, regional, and national economies thrive. To learn more visit fsc-ccf.ca.

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