



LESSONS IN LEARNING

The benefits of
experiential learning

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In response to the demands of an emerging knowledge economy, Canadian employers face a growing need for highly skilled personnel. Young adults in Canada are among the most highly educated young people in the world, but post-secondary education does not necessarily impart all of the skills that employers demand. Many post-secondary students turn to programs that include an experiential learning component—such as co-operative education, internships or other forms of work placements—in order to develop a broader range of occupational skills.

The demand for skill in the Canadian labour market

Between 1991 and 2003, the number of high-knowledge businesses (e.g., engineering, sciences and related services) in Canada increased by 78%, while the number of low-knowledge businesses (e.g., accommodation, food and beverage services) fell by 3%.¹ There is a growing need for highly skilled workers in Canada. Young Canadians are responding to that need with steady growth in post-secondary participation: between 1990 and 2005, the proportion of 25 to 44-year-olds with a post-secondary credential increased from 45% to 64%.² Among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (OECD), Canada ranks second in the proportion of its young adult population that has attained post-secondary education.³

Strong growth in post-secondary attainment is an important response to the growing demand for skill in the Canadian labour market. However, in addition to academic skills, employers require occupational skills in their employees—these include job-specific technical skills and the so-called soft skills.^{4,5} Although soft skills are not frequently the specific focus of teaching and learning in post-secondary institutions, they are very important to employers. According to a recent survey of employers in British Columbia, the top five skills employers look for in new employees are all soft skills: interpersonal, teamwork, problem solving, communication and leadership skills.⁶

Experiential learning

Occupational skills can be acquired through direct experience in the workplace. Many post-secondary programs include a mandatory experiential learning component that students must complete to fulfil their graduation requirements. For example, in most teacher–education programs, student teachers must complete a teaching practicum; graduate students in psychology must complete an internship before they can become registered psychologists; and most programs in the trades include periods of apprenticeship interspersed with classroom learning. In addition to these types of mandatory work placements, students can elect to participate in voluntary experiential learning programs such as co-operative education.

There is a scarcity of data on the availability of, and participation in, co-op education in Canada. However, there is a perception among stakeholders that many more students could be engaged in co-op education. For example, in New Brunswick the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour recently collaborated with several partners to determine why there are so few co-op students and why co-op opportunities often go unfilled. The available data suggest that there are approximately 80,000 Canadian students enrolled in

post-secondary co-op education, two-thirds of whom are at the university level.⁸ Given a university enrolment of more than one million in Canada, it is clear that participation in co-op education is relatively rare among Canadian students.⁹ However, co-op students appear to derive a number of benefits from their work placements, suggesting that opportunities for co-op education should be expanded in Canada.

Benefits to students

A recent survey of 3,300 post-secondary students in New Brunswick revealed that most co-op students participate in work placements in order to gain work-related experience and to help them make future career choices (see Figure 1). The available evidence suggests that co-op work placements often successfully fulfil these goals. For example, in the New Brunswick study, nearly three-quarters of students who had participated in some form of work placement reported gaining specific content-area knowledge, and most also reported gaining soft skills from their work placements (Table 1).

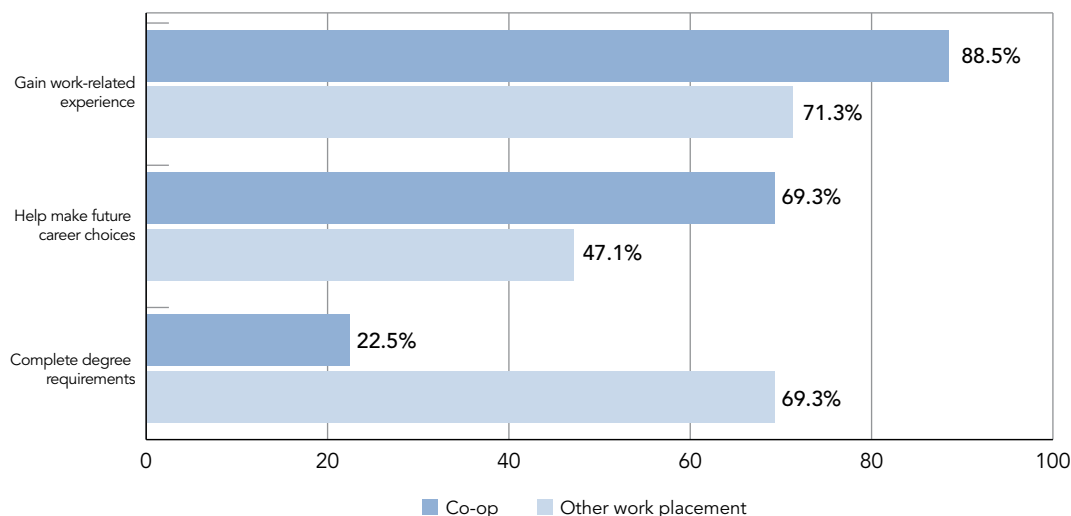
Other studies have confirmed that experiential learning helps students gain precious work-related social skills, helps them gain maturity and increases their confidence about the future.¹⁰

In addition to gaining valuable skills, students who responded to the New Brunswick survey identified a number of positive outcomes of their participation in experiential learning. Two-thirds reported that their experience helped them identify their academic direction and nearly three-quarters reported that it helped them identify their future career direction. Nearly all students (91%) rated their experience as a valuable one.

Co-operative Education

Program which "alternates periods of academic study with periods of work experience [...] in accordance with the following criteria: (1) each work situation is developed and/or approved by the co-operative educational institution as a suitable learning situation; (2) the co-operative student is engaged in productive work rather than merely observing; (3) the co-operative student receives remuneration for the work performed; (4) the co-operative student's progress on the job is monitored by the co-operative education institution; (5) the co-operative student's performance on the job is supervised and evaluated by the student's co-operative employer; (6) the time spent in periods of work experience must be at least thirty per cent of the time spent in academic study."⁷

Figure 1:
Percentage of post-secondary students selecting each reason as indicative of their participation in programs offering work placements



Researchers have also investigated the relationship between participating in work and learning opportunities during post-secondary education and subsequent employment.^{11,12,13} These studies found that students with experiential learning experience were more likely to have a job upon graduation than those without such experience. There is also evidence that co-operative education work placements support the development of job-related abilities such as communication skills and team work skills.¹⁴ Such placements are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and, more specifically, higher levels of satisfaction with salary and benefits¹⁵.

Table 1:
Percentage of students with experience with work placement who report having gained each of the following skills from their experience

Skills Gained	Percentage	Skills Gained	Percentage
Specific content-area knowledge	73.30%	Computer skills	38.30%
Organizational skills	59.50%	Writing skills	29.30%
Leadership skills	47.90%	Other skills	5.40%
Language/Communication skills	46.80%		

Combining formal education with experiential learning—such as occurs in co-op education—can increase the salience of the learning opportunities presented by workplace experience. For example, a study conducted in the United States compared the work experience-related attitudes of 228 students who were

employed through a co-operative education program with those of 375 students who held similar jobs but were not enrolled in a co-op program. Students in the co-operative education programs reported more opportunity for learning in their current jobs. They also reported seeing clearer connections between their job, their school work, and their expected career path, and co-op students reported greater intrinsic interest in their work.¹⁶

Benefits to employers

Employers who provide students with opportunities for experiential learning also reap their own benefits.

An employer forum held in 1994 at the conference of the Canadian Association for Co-operative Education concluded that employers rated their experience with co-operative education programs very positively. According to a survey distributed to more than 800 employers during this forum, co-operative education programs meet the needs of employers by providing sufficient service and flexibility and ensuring that employability skills are central in preparing students for these programs.¹⁷

Another study examined the cost-benefit of employers' participation in co-operative education programs. This study revealed that the overall costs to employers are lower for employees enrolled in co-operative education programs than for regular employees.¹⁸ Moreover, the cost-effectiveness of hiring students is improved by allowing the release of professional employees from sub-professional tasks.¹⁹

More recently, a survey probed nearly 100 employers' perceptions of co-operative education. Employers in this study ranked the following as the three most important benefits of participating in co-operative education programs: (1) the ability to hire motivated and enthusiastic new employees; (2) the opportunity to screen students for permanent employment; and (3) the chance to engage in positive interactions with post-secondary institutions. Employers also considered their co-op employees to possess greater levels of skill and competence than non-co-op employees.²⁰

Finally, a recent survey conducted with 85 employers in New Brunswick found that the majority (70%) of those who have experience with programs such as co-op education considered their experience to be valuable.²¹ When asked about the reasons they valued the experience, just over one half of employers reported that the experience allowed them to discover qualified candidates for future employment.

Lessons in learning: Expanding and improving experiential learning opportunities in Canada

In Canada, there exists significant potential to increase participation in experiential learning. One finding from the recent survey of employers in British Columbia was unequivocal: employers strongly encourage students to take advantage of co-operative education and other forms of work placements to gain valuable work experience and to develop communication and teamwork skills.²² Research suggests that students who participated in co-operative

education report that they would recommend the program to their fellow classmates.^{23,24} Moreover, those students who have no such experience say they would consider participating in the future.²⁵

Mobilizing information about experiential learning programs will be key to expanding participation in these programs: both students and employers identify lack of awareness of such programs as their primary reason for not participating.²⁶ One way to increase awareness among the student population is to have employers visit classrooms to speak about work and learning opportunities that are available. As well, previous work placement students can contribute by sharing their experiences with prospective students.

Students and employers who were surveyed in New Brunswick also urged the implementation of incentives such as better financial compensation and more course credits. Offering students a flexible and exciting workplace and giving them the opportunity to work on meaningful and stimulating projects were also cited by employers as important incentives. Employers further suggested the creation of centralized lists of potential candidates that organizations could easily access, as well as lists of potential work placements that students could easily access. Many respondents also mentioned a need for regular forums for employers and post-secondary institutions to meet to discuss current and future needs.²⁷

Ensuring that existing and future experiential learning programs provide students with good quality learning environments is an essential factor in ensuring high levels of participation in such programs in the future. Researchers recommend that experiential learning programs ensure that students are provided with quality work placements so that they benefit fully from their work experience. The characteristics of high-quality work placements include:

- A stimulating work environment that encourages inquisitiveness and is forgiving of errors;
- The provision of appropriate mentorship;
- The integration of work and classroom experience;
- The requirement of reflective work-term assignment to help solidify the learning outcomes.^{28,29}

Benefits of students' involvement with experiential learning are not restricted to students and employers. Research suggests that academic institutions benefit by attracting and retaining good students to their programs, by increasing the employment rates of their graduates, and by enhancing their relationships with business, government and community organizations.^{30,31} In addition, there are societal benefits to increased participation in co-operative education, including reduced demand for student loans, increased income tax revenue and increases in partnerships between industry and education. Ensuring that information about experiential learning programs is widely available and that these programs are relevant and attractive to students and employers will help increase participation rates.

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