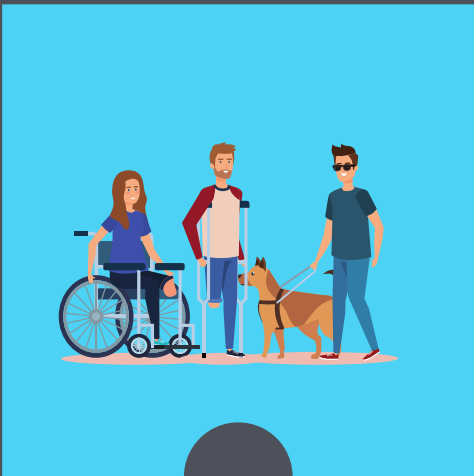


EXPANDING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES WITH AN ACCESSIBILITY APPROACH



Final report

June 2021

Mignon Alphonso, Independent Consultant, Gender and Social Inclusion



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Expanding Work-Integrated Learning Opportunities (WIL) with an Accessibility Approach project was designed to investigate the gap in students' participation in post-secondary institutions' (PSIs) WIL programs and the need for a targeted approach to increase employment opportunities for students with disabilities (SWD).

The Project was made possible with the generous support of the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training and the ACE-WIL Association for Co-operative Education and WIL British Columbia/Yukon Territory (ACE-WIL B.C./Yukon).

A special thank you to Simon Fraser University's (SFU) WIL Director and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) team. Without their initiative, the Project would not have materialized.

Thank you to the SFU Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) for their support in providing access to their student body and the resulting voices of SWD in this report.

Most of all, a special thank you to the students who shared their lived experiences with disabilities and thus, invaluable contributions—their voices have been emphasized throughout this report.

Additionally, the Project's outcomes would not have been realized without the contributions and support of the SFU-WIL Accessibility Working Group members, external expertise and post-secondary partner institutions who provided guidance and support.

A special thank you to the Project's Accessibility Coordinator, Zoreen Nuraney, whose support and commitment to the students she mentored, and the overall project, has been key in achieving the Project's goals. Additionally, thank you to Sumara Stroshein researcher, as well as the co-op students who worked with Zoreen on this project, namely Carina Xu, Dennis Le, Justin Yang, and Cindy Xe.

We would like to also thank Mignon Alphonso, Independent Consultant who was instrumental in compiling and integrating the data in a meaningful way as well as the writing and designing this final report.

Finally, a special thank you to Heather Williams for her continued commitment to this work and to the report's final publication.

SFU WIL Accessibility Working Group Members (listed below in alphabetical order).

Brenda Badgero
Career and Volunteer Services

Cheri Fiedler
Biomedical Physiology & Kinesiology

Mikaela Basile
Disability and Neurodiverse Alliance

Precious Ile
Student Engagement and Retention

Sanam Prasad
Disability and Neurodiverse Alliance

Suzanne Leach
Centre for Accessible Learning

Tony Botelho
Career and Volunteer Services

Zoreen Nuraney
(formerly) WIL Central

External Partners

CanAssist
Inclusion BC
LimeConnect

Post-secondary Partner Institutions

Okanagan College
Thompson Rivers University
University of British Columbia
University of Victoria

KEY TERMS

Accommodation refers to an employer's reasonable adjustments in the workplace and hiring process that allows individuals with disabilities to apply for jobs and fully perform the essential duties of a position.¹

Association for Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning (ACE-WIL) for British Columbia (B.C.) and Yukon (ACE-WIL B.C./Yukon) is a non-profit comprised of post-secondary and publicly funded institutions in the province. ACE-WIL promotes excellence in post-secondary experiential education through advancing opportunities for students.

Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada) is the lead organization for WIL in Canada. CEWIL Canada's mission is to build the capacity to develop future-ready students and graduates through quality WIL.

Disability refers to a condition or illness—visible or invisible, episodic and/or continuous that affects a person's senses or activities—physical, sensory, mental health (including addiction), developmental disabilities, and learning disabilities. However, a short-term health issue such as the flu would not qualify for accommodation in the workplace.²

Disclosure refers to an employee telling an employer about their disability or chronic health condition. Employees can decide to disclose their disability based on whether it will impact their job performance; if not, the employee is not required to disclose. If the employee will require accommodation to do the job, they must disclose their disability.³

Post-secondary institutions in Canada include private and public universities/institutions, colleges and institutes. A post-secondary education usually refers to having a diploma, certification and/or an academic degree.

Professional development (PD) refers to training, certification and education/coursework, attending conferences and situated learning opportunities, which are aligned with succeeding in a person's career (or transitioning to another field).⁴

Self-confidence is an attitude/perception about oneself regarding skills and abilities as well as a realistic sense of your strengths and weaknesses.

*High self-confidence means you have control over your life that leads to better performance, healthy relationships, openness to try new things which is all part of resilience.*⁵

¹ The BC Human Rights code and the Canadian Human Rights Act legislate that employers cannot discriminate against persons with disabilities and require employers to provide reasonable accommodation.

² Specific physical and sensory disabilities include quadriplegia, vision or hearing loss, etc. Disabilities also include brain injuries and chronic health conditions (arthritis, hepatitis C, diabetes, morbid obesity and others). <https://www.sfu.ca/wil/accessibility-student-resource/glossary.html>

³ Community Legal Assistance Society. (2015). BC Human Rights Clinic: Duty to Accommodate.

⁴ The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada. (2021, May 26). What is career development and training? Professional development. <https://pipsc.ca/what-is-careerdevelopment-and-training>

⁵ Psychology Today. (2021, May 26). Confidence. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/confidence>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENT | 01 |
| KEY TERMS | 02 |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 04 |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 05 |
| 2. METHODOLOGY | 06 |
| 2.1. Literature review | 06 |
| 2.2. WIL accessibility survey | 06 |
| 2.3. Mentorship reflection questionnaire | 06 |
| 2.4. Post-secondary institutions' discussion group | 06 |
| 2.5. Limitations | 07 |
| 3. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS | 08 |
| 3.1. Low levels of participation from students with disabilities (SWD) in WIL programs | 08 |
| 3.1.1. Disability-related concerns | |
| 3.1.2. Disclosure barriers | 09 |
| 3.1.3. Levels of interest in WIL programs | 09 |
| 3.2. Post-secondary Institutions (PSIs) | 10 |
| 3.2.1. Lack of specific program support for SWD | |
| 3.2.2. Low levels of staff and practitioner knowledge regarding disabilities | 12 |
| 3.3. Workplace and employer barriers | 12 |
| 3.3.1. Impacts of workplace environment on SWD ability to perform | |
| 3.3.2. Other workplace-related barriers | 13 |
| 3.4. Project outcomes | 14 |
| 3.4.1. Students' experience with mentorship sessions | |
| 3.4.2. Accessibility Coordinator experience with mentorship sessions | 17 |
| 4. RECOMMENDATIONS | 18 |
| 4.1. Create PSIs' WIL program policy, processes and resources at the institutional level | 18 |
| 4.2. Increase multi-stakeholder collaboration | 19 |
| 4.3. Earmark targeted resources to increase SWD participation in WIL programs | 19 |
| 4.4. Strengthen proactive communications systems | 20 |
| 4.5. Create post-graduation/career follow-up program | 20 |
| 4.6. Further research | 21 |
| 5. CONCLUSION | 22 |
| Appendix I: Expanding WIL opportunities with an accessibility approach resources | 23 |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“ Students with disabilities do not receive the same benefits from postsecondary education as other students. While there has been progress ... there is still work to be done to reduce structural barriers, discrimination and alienation from access to career education and work-integrated learning⁶ ”

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programs, including co-operative education are designed to bridge academic studies with work experience for securing relevant employment. Students with disabilities (SWD), however, are lacking or have limited experience that help bridge academic work to career choices.⁷

Recognizing the inequality between students in accessing WIL programs, Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) leadership and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) team created the “*Expanding Work-Integrated Learning Opportunities with an Accessibility Approach*” project in February 2020, to explore this gap and validate the need for targeted support for SWD.

A mixed methodology⁸ was used to get a deeper understanding of the barriers experienced by SWD and pathways for addressing them. The project coincided with COVID-19, which resulted in a shift in methodological design, from in-person to online. As a consequence of the shift, there were some project limitations (no campus-based opportunities and staff turnover) as well as positive outcomes for SWD (increased engagement in diverse topics, self-confidence, secured paid positions, etc.).

This report presents the Project's findings and outlines recommendations for post-secondary institutions' WIL programs for increasing participation of SWD, for example:

FINDINGS



RECOMMENDATIONS

Low levels of participation of SWD in WIL programs due to disability and disclosure concerns.

Lack of targeted support from post-secondary institutions' WIL programs.

Positive project outcomes that validate the need for targeted resources such as a designated WIL Accessibility Coordinator (AC) and mentorship programs.

Implement WIL policies/processes (accessible admissions requirements and fee structure) and resources (designated WIL AC).

Greater multi-stakeholder collaboration among WIL and campus services staff and employers, to create flexible and accessible opportunities.

Earmark resources—customize training programs for SWD, inclusive training for WIL staff and practitioners, post-graduation/career follow-up program, etc.

The project also highlighted areas for further research—positive and negative impacts of the shift from in-person to online as well as revealed the need to incorporate a multi-layered approach to project design, to expose the deeper levels of barriers faced by SWD (gender, sexual identity, race, class, etc.).

This report also includes a list of resources that were developed and implemented by SFU's WIL office and a link to a video with students' testimonials of their experience participating in the Project's mentorship sessions. (See [Appendix I](#)).

^{6&7} Advancing Career Development in Canada (CERIC). (2019, May 10). Post-secondary Students with Disabilities Face Gaps in Career Education Service. National Education Association of Disabled Students.
<https://ceric.ca/2019/05/post-secondary-students-with-disabilities-face-gaps-in-career-education-services/>

⁸ Literature review of 32 documents, online survey with 140 responses, 9 students' testimonials and PSIs Discussion Group.

INTRODUCTION

“ ... paid work experience is an evidenced-based predictor of positive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Regardless of the type of WIL opportunity, ... such experiences must be offered to SWD in a manner that is accessible, equitable and supported.”⁹

Work-integrated Learning (WIL) is an important partnership between an academic institution, a host business/organizations and a student for securing relevant employment (e.g., co-op opportunities). Although research reveals that students with disabilities (SWD) face tremendous challenges, "the exact nature of the barriers faced by this group of students remains to be explored."¹⁰

Simon Fraser University's (SFU) WIL leadership and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) team acknowledge the inequalities among students and developed the "Expanding Work-Integrated Learning Opportunities with an Accessibility Approach" project in February 2020, to explore the unique barriers faced by SWD and strategies for addressing them.

The mixed methodology used in this Project (literature review, online survey, mentorship questionnaire and a Post-secondary institutions' Discussion Group) resulted in three broad findings: (1) low levels of participation of SWD in WIL programs due to their disability and disclosure concerns, (2) lack of targeted support from PSIs' WIL programs and (3) the Project's positive outcomes.

The Project's findings provided sound rationale for recommendations to PSIs' WIL programs for increasing participation of SWD, such as:



Implementing WIL policies and processes (accessible admissions & fees) as well as targeted resources—i.e., designated WIL Accessibility Coordinator, customized programs, campus-wide coordination system and a post-graduation/career follow-up program.



Greater multi-stakeholder collaboration efforts among WIL programs, campus services and employers to create flexible employment opportunities.



Further research on the barriers and opportunities for SWD given the consequences of COVID-19 (shift to "learn-and-work-from-home") and a layered approach to project design to uncover the layers of discrimination faced by SWD.

The tangible outcomes of this Project have been the creation of a "Student Accessibility Resource" to support SWD in navigating their work-related journey, an "Employer Resource Handbook" for assisting employers to engage with SWDs (from policy, to recruitment, to onboarding and retention) and a publicly accessible website (see [Appendix I](#)).

⁹ Scheef et al. (2018). Exploring Barriers for Facilitating Work Experience Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities Enrolled in Postsecondary Education Programs. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 31(3),209–224. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1200607>

¹⁰ Valencia-Forrester et al. (2019). Practical Aspects of Service Learning Make Work-Integrated Learning Wise Practice for Inclusive Education in Australia. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 20(1), 31–42. New Zealand Association for Cooperative Education. University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand.

2. METHODOLOGY

The Project's mixed methodology included a literature review and analysis of 32 documents, an online survey with 140 respondents, student testimonials, and a PSIs' Discussion Group.¹¹

2.1 Literature Review

The literature review of 32 academic articles, post-secondary institutions' publications and government websites was designed to get a deeper understanding of the unique barriers SWD face when deciding and/or participating in WIL programs and avenues for addressing them.

The key findings from the literature review, included:

- **Benefits of WIL programs for SWD** (e.g., increased self-confidence).
- **Lack/low levels of participation of SWD** due to physical and social barriers.¹²
- **WIL program barriers** (lack of institutional policies and processes).
- **Workplace and employer-related barriers** (large time investment, lack of clear policies and guidelines for accommodation and negative perceptions).
- **Strategies for increasing participation of SWD** in WIL program (e.g., "Individual Career Plan" Model, "Integration of Disability and Work Services," etc.).¹³

2.2. WIL Accessibility Survey

The online survey consisted of 16 quantitative and qualitative questions and was distributed to 902 students leading to 140 submissions.¹⁴

The purpose of the survey was to get a better understanding of the lived experiences of SWD and barriers preventing them from applying and participating in WIL programs.

The data from the 140 responses confirmed similar findings from the literature review (i.e., lack of SWD participation in WIL programs, program and workplace-related barriers) but highlighted additional challenges, for example:

Students' feared delay in graduation due to workload and personal demands, eligibility requirements, lack of relevant opportunities, etc.

2.3. Mentorship Reflection Questionnaire

The Project's design included mentorship sessions with a designated AC. The mentorship sessions were conducted with 23 students via an online platform (Zoom) over a period of 12-months.

The sessions were an hour long and ranged from one to 15 sessions per student. Sessions focused on supporting students' work search journey and included action items (to do lists), personal updates, timelines, discussions about interests, and access to pertinent resources.

The students' testimonials from their experience participating in the sessions moved beyond the findings from the literature review and online survey to provide insight as to the value of the mentorship sessions with the AC.

Students reported improved self-reflection/confidence, greater self-advocacy and increased organizational skills.

2.4. Post-secondary Institutions' (PSIs') Discussion Group

The PSIs' Discussion Group was added to: (1) exchange knowledge and support each other's work for increasing WIL opportunities and (2) establish partnerships that would continue beyond the Project's completion. The PSIs' Discussion offered new approaches for addressing accessibility issues for SWD, for example:

Creating pre-employment courses focused on specific needs of SWD and "Discussion Circles" for employers.

¹¹ The Discussion Group was made up of four institutions: Okanagan College, the University of Victoria, Thompson Rivers University, and the University of British Columbia.

¹² Social barriers include discrimination, bias or stereotypes directed at marginalized groups.

¹³ Students were given the option to complete the survey in-person, via phone or online. A 100% of the survey was filled out online.

¹⁴ The survey was distributed by the Centre for Accessibility Learning (CAL) between Fall of 2018 to Spring of 2020.



2. LIMITATIONS

2.5. Limitations

One limitation of the Project was the shift in the Project's design due to COVID-19, from in-person campus-based learning (mentorship sessions, training, workshops, etc.) and outreach to employers, to remote learning. Without the in-person training and work experience, it is not possible, therefore, to know if the original project design would have provided greater benefits for SWD.

Another project limitation was that while 140 responses to the survey provided a solid dataset for analysis, the student testimonials questionnaire only received 39 per cent (nine of 23 students) participation.

A larger response rate to the questionnaire may have provided deeper insight of the specific physical and invisible barriers faced by SWD as well as experiences participating in the mentorships sessions.

A further limitation was staff turnover on the project, which led to a decrease in capacity to support the project with continuity. As a result of staff turnover, data analysis and compilation of this final report was conducted by several people, including the initial project staff, a research assistant and an independent consultant. It is possible that some aspects of the findings, therefore, were highlighted over others given staff turnover.

The Project's overall mixed methodological framework (i.e., four qualitative and quantitative research methods), did allow for substantial data consistency and analysis. Therefore, the project findings and recommendations offer sound rationale for the recommendations included in this report and the creation of the online resources for SWD, WIL staff and employers.

3. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

“ Institutions and employers should work together to develop programs to support the school-to-work transition for postsecondary education grads with disabilities. This program should consider the health needs ... particularly students with learning physical and mental health disabilities.”¹⁵

The overall Project methodology resulted in three broad findings: (1) low levels of participation from SWD in WIL programs, (2) lack of targeted support by PSIs' WIL programs and (3) the Project's positive outcomes.

3.1. Low levels of participation from Student with Disabilities (SWD) in WIL programs

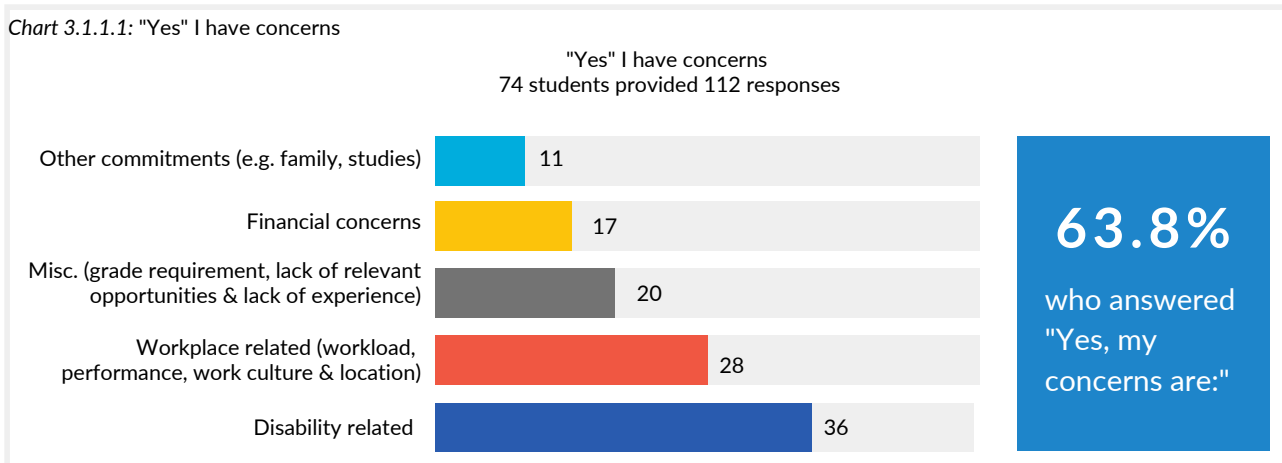
Students decide not to participate in WIL programs due to disability and disclosure concerns, lack knowledge and awareness of options/opportunities, program and workplace barriers.

3.1.1. Disability-related concerns

A key finding from the literature review is SWD decide not to take part in WIL programs due to unwelcoming environments, lack of accommodation for disability, social stigma, time and energy spent advocating for removal of barriers, and financial concerns.

The online survey confirmed the literature review findings and provided more insight into the reasons for the low level of engagement. Out of the 140 who responded to the survey, 116 answered the question, "do you have any concerns preventing them from applying to co-op?"

Out of the 116 who responded to the question, 63.8 per cent (74/116) provided the following answers:



Out of the 116 respondents, 36 per cent (42/116) said "no," they did not have any concerns preventing them from applying to co-op. Students said, they did not apply to cop-op due to:

Other commitments—e.g., family/studies (10/42); fears of delaying graduation (6/42); lack of awareness of WIL programs/opportunities (6/42); already have other experience/s (4/42); financial concerns (1); grade requirement (1); and, lack of experience (1). Thirteen out of 42 respondents had no specific reasons why they did not apply to co-op (13).

¹⁵ Chatoor, K. (2021) *Postsecondary Credential Attainment and Labour Market Outcomes for Ontario Students with Disabilities*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
<https://heqco.ca/pub/postsecondary-credential-attainment-and-labour-market-outcomes-for-ontario-students-with-disabilities/>

3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

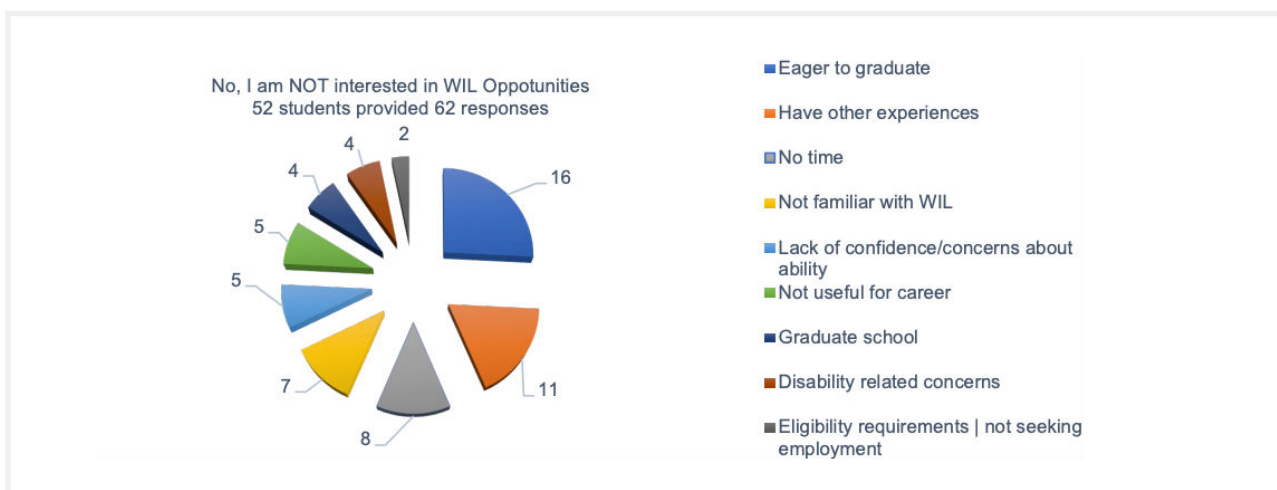
3.1.2. Disclosure barriers

Another barrier preventing SWD for applying and participating in WIL opportunities include daunting disclosure processes¹⁶ (i.e., WIL co-op staff), lack or limited awareness of available accommodations or options and uncertainty regarding transition from school-to-work accommodation. As a survey respondent put it:

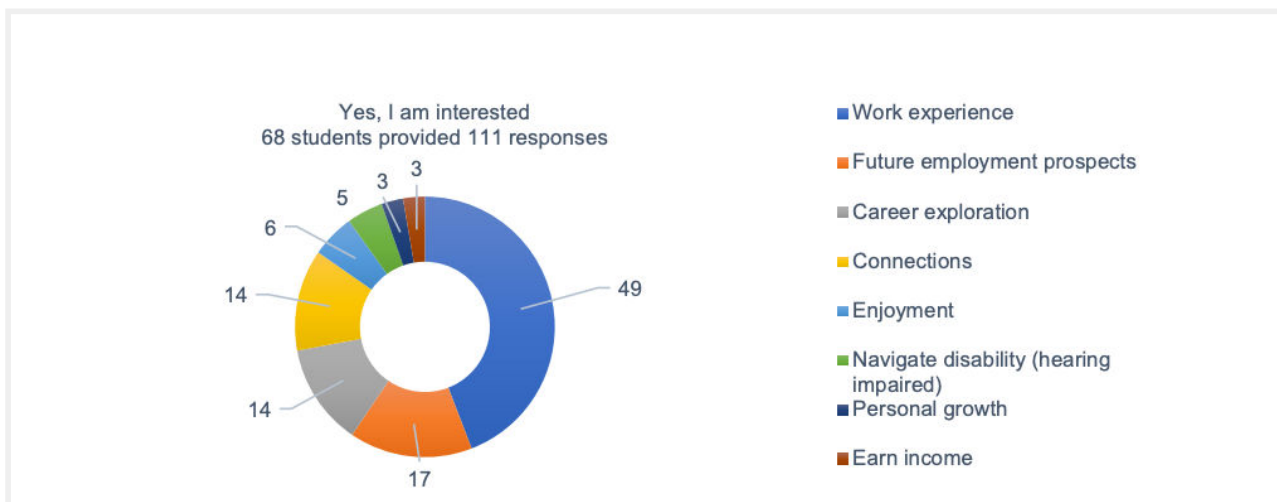
“Having to disclose disability and needing to educate others to get accommodations (immense amounts of energy to advocate for barriers to be removed, lots of institutional pushback and ableism¹⁷), which is not worth it”

3.1.3. Level of interest in WIL programs

The online survey received 120 responses to the question, “[d]o you have an interest in participating in WIL co-op or other forms of experiential learning, such as internships or service learning?” A high percentage of respondents, 43.3 per cent said “no,” I don't have any interest and provided the following reasons.



Of the 120 responses, 56.7 per cent (68/120) did say “yes,” I am interested in WIL co-op for the following reasons.



¹⁶ Nott & Zafft. (2006). Career-Focused Experiential Education for Students with Disabilities: An Outline of the Legal Terrain. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 19(1), 27–38. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ844622>

¹⁷ Ableism is the belief that people with disabilities do not deserve equal respect or consideration or are of less inherent value than others. Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2016). Policy on ableism and discrimination based on disability. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability>



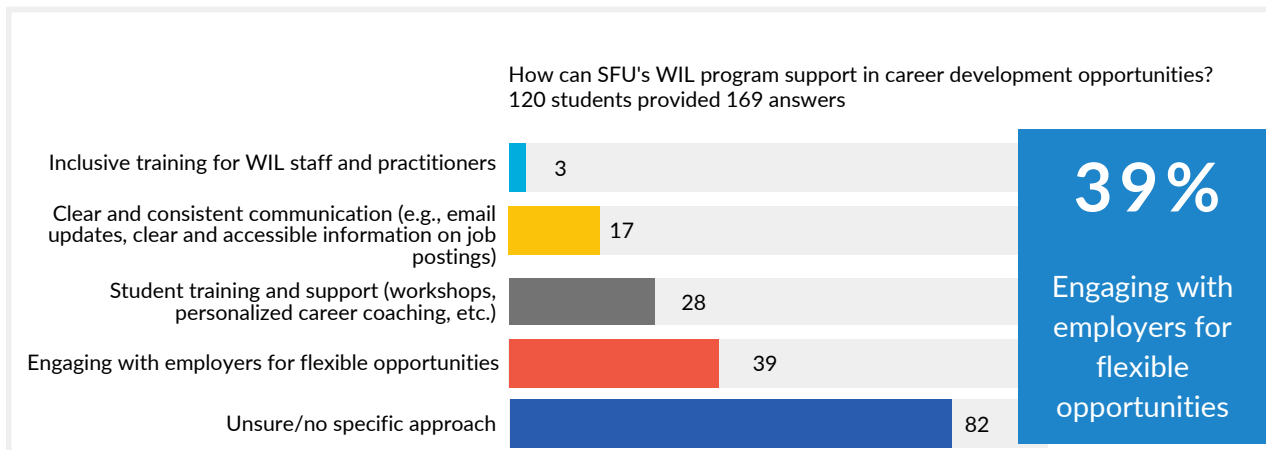
3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.2. Post-secondary institutions' (PSIs)' WIL program barriers

“ Significant transition barriers into, between, and out of levels of post-secondary education remain, with particular challenges faced by disabled students transitioning into post-secondary, and from post-secondary into the labour market.¹⁸ ”

3.2.1. Lack of specific WIL program support for SWD

The 86 per cent (120/140) who responded to the question, *how can SFU's WIL program better support you in engaging in career development opportunities*, provided 169 answers:



Some detailed responses from students, included:

"Specific opportunities for CAL students that are personalized and flexible."

"It would be nice if there was better educated, more experienced staff devoted to helping people students find opportunities."

¹⁸ National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS). (2019, May 10). Post-secondary students face gaps in career education services. <https://ceric.ca/2019/05/post-secondary-students-with-disabilities-face-gaps-in-career-education-services/>



3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.2. (Cont.) Post-secondary institutions WIL program barriers

More detailed suggestions from students on how SFU's WIL program can better support them to engage in *career development opportunities*, are grouped below into four broad categories:



Communication

"Ensure that each job description outlines or has a link to the employer's accessibility policy, which must be detailed. ... the built environment, physical accessibility, cognitive accessibility, and sensory accessibility."



Specific opportunities

"... to have some on campus jobs that are available to those with disabilities as a priority. ... [o]ffering specific internship options that are accessible and reasonable to every disabled student. ... [and] [m]aking these opportunities more known (via email/group meetings, etc.)."



SWD training and support

"It would help if we could learn some strategies for asking for accommodations in the workplace, as it can be quite intimidating, especially as an intern. My disability is invisible, so I've hidden it in the past to prevent my coworkers from knowing, but the cost was further injuring myself."



WIL staff training

"Educating every department on disabilities and how to be respectful. ... better educated, more experienced staff devoted to helping disabled students find opportunities. I find that the most helpful people are people that understand your lived experiences. Maybe SFU could commit to hiring disabled staff to work with disabled students."

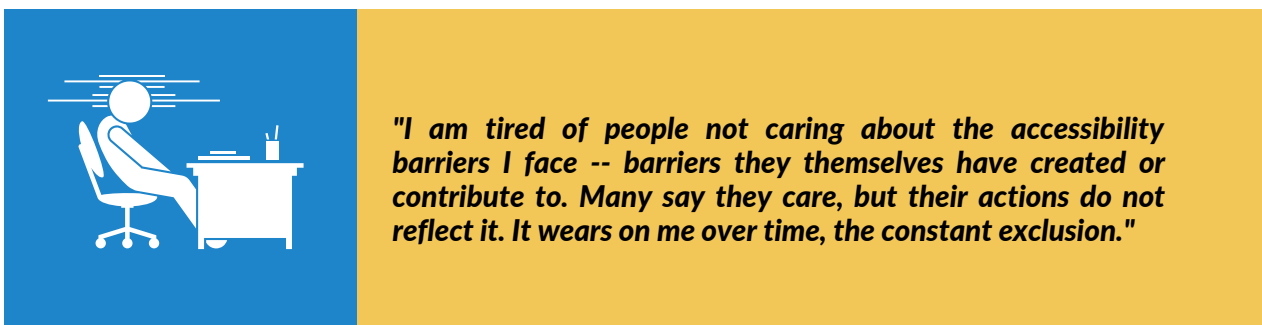
3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.2.2. Low levels of WIL staff and practitioner knowledge and training regarding disabilities

The literature review and document analysis highlighted similar findings from the survey regarding WIL program barriers, for instance:

- *Low levels of staff training* and knowledge of accessibility requirements.
- *Lack of resources* (funds and time limitations).
- *Negative perceptions by staff* of disabilities and capabilities of SWD.
- *Challenges finding supportive placement* and/or work opportunities.
- *Absence of a proactive approach* by staff with employers and practitioners.¹⁹

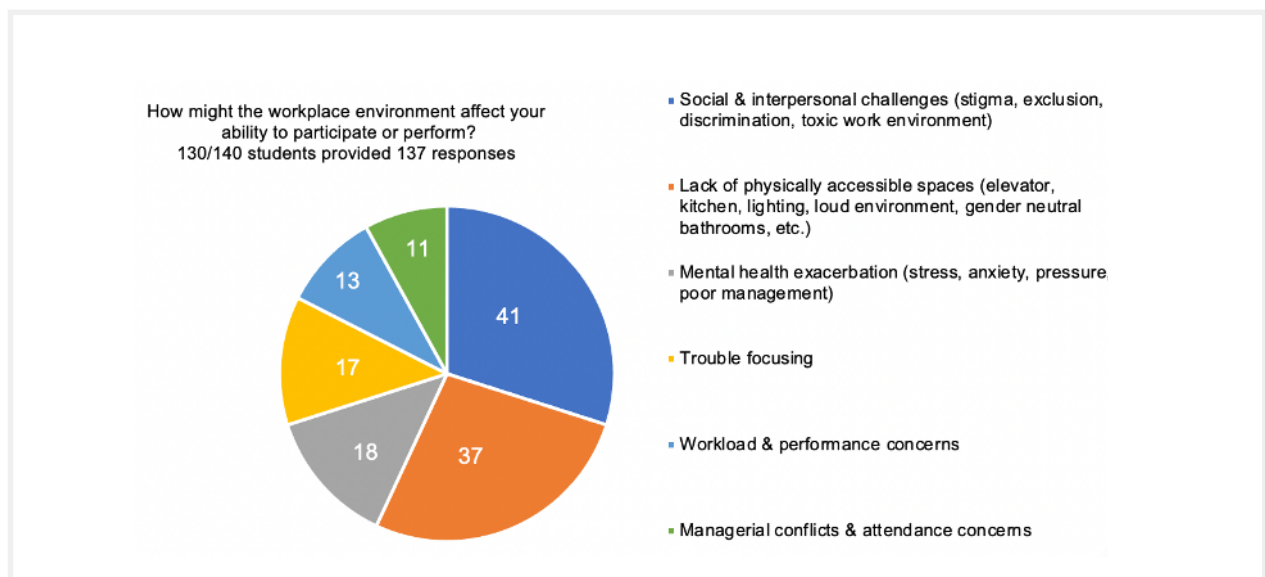
As one student noted:



3.3. Workplace and employer barriers

There was a 93 per cent (130/140) response rate to the question, "[h]ow might the workplace environment affect your ability to participate or perform?"

3.3.1. Impacts of workplace environment on SWD ability to perform

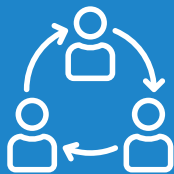


¹⁹ Scheef, et al. (2018). Exploring Barriers for Facilitating Work Experience Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities Enrolled in Postsecondary Education Programs. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 31(3), 209–224. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1200607>

3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.3.2. Other workplace-related barriers

The literature review also revealed the lack of multi-stakeholder collaboration between PSIs' WIL programs and employers which serve as a barrier for SWD participation in work-related programs and opportunities.



Multi-stakeholder collaboration is a crucial process in which education professionals establish partnerships with personnel from multiple agencies to achieve a common goal: to improve the post-secondary success of students with disabilities.²⁰

Workplace-related barriers identified in the literature review, include:

- *Large time investment* of WIL staff and practitioners to develop healthy relationships with employers.²¹
- *Lack of interest of multiple stakeholders* to collaborate (i.e., students, WIL staff and employers).
- *Absence and lack of policies* and guidelines regarding legal regulations or obligations— who is responsible for providing and paying for accommodations.
- *Employers' lack of knowledge* and negative perceptions regarding disabilities that result in discrimination and discomfort in the workplace.
- *Inconsistent accommodation* provision for SWD.²²



"I have never heard any mention of disability/accommodation in the coop program workshops and materials I have been in the co-op program for 4 years. If WIL is not communicating to employers and students that disabilities can be accommodated ... [it makes] students living with disabilities feel as if the program isn't for them."

²⁰ IRIS Centre. (2021). How can school and agency personnel work together to support smooth transitions for these students Interagency Collaboration, p.4. <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/tran-ic/cresource/q2/p04/>

²¹ & ²²

Scheef et al. (2018). Exploring Barriers for Facilitating Work Experience Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities Enrolled in Postsecondary Education Programs. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 31(3), 209–224. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1200607>

3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

“ ... specifically, there is a need for disability related supports and dedicated professionals for students who engage in WIL programs in higher education.”²³

3.4. Project Outcomes

There were significant findings of the positive impacts of the Project’s mentorship sessions with the AC such as increased confidence, professional development, organizational skills, and securing volunteering and paid work positions.

An important outcome of the mentorship sessions was nine of 23 students secured paid positions.

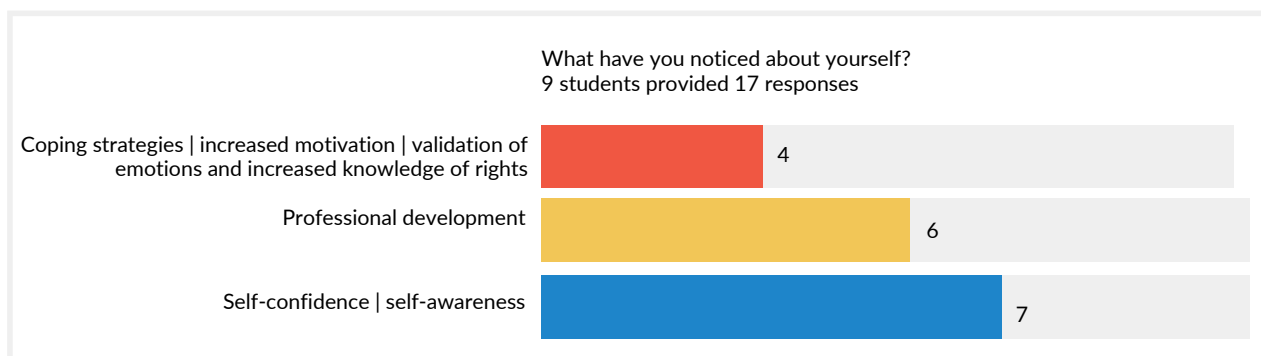


3.4.1. Students’ experience with mentorship sessions

When mentees were asked, “what enticed you about our sessions that prompted you to continue,” 39 per cent (9/23) provided 17 responses, including:

- Options and resources provided (6/17).
- Professional and personal development (4/17).
- Mentorship qualities of AC (empathetic, respectful, etc.) (4/17).
- Increased self-confidence and self-esteem (i.e., self-identity) (2/17).
- Structure of sessions (1/17).

The nine students who filled out the testimonial questionnaire provided specific feedback on the question, *what have you noticed about yourself* participating in the mentorship sessions, such as:



²³ Work integrated learning resources for students with disabilities: are post-secondary institutions in Canada supporting this demographic to be career ready? www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/HESWBL-08-2019-0106/full/html

3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.4.1. Cont.: Students' experience with mentorship sessions

When students were asked about the effectiveness of "action items" on their learning and growth, eight out of nine students, 89 per cent indicated improved organizational skills,²⁴ which led to:

- Increased self-confidence.
- Improved communication skills.
- Decreased stress, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed.
- Greater goal setting and attainment results.
- More motivation that kept them on track.
- Stronger coping mechanisms.

Action items were developed during the sessions and used as an accountability tool for agreed deliverables between the AC and mentee. Students valued the structure of the sessions noting it provided **focus and direction**. By strengthening soft skills,²⁵ students said it decreased their anxiety and better prepared them for the workforce.

The increase in organizational skills is an important impact given 85 per cent (119/140) of SWD identified their disability as **mental health** (i.e., depression, anxiety and ADHD²⁶). The positive outcomes of organizational skills and tools (action items, mock interviews, role plays, etc.), therefore, on SWD provides sound justification for creating targeted mentorship programs.

When asked, what could have been done differently in the mentorship sessions, out of the nine students who answered the questionnaire, 67 per cent (6/9) said they were completely satisfied with the AC and process.

67 per cent (6/9) said they were completely satisfied with the AC and process.



67%

Participants in the mentorship sessions were also asked if there was something they would like to discuss in the future and/or stay in touch about. Respondents' commented that:

- Post-graduation and WIL experience follow-up.
- Check-in later in their degree.
- Career coaching: interviews, staying on track and advice about strategies and possible career options outside their field of study.
- Concern over disability accommodation, disclosure and employment.

One student said:

“ ... I really hope this is a program that is continued and expanded. I will forever be grateful, and I can't imagine where I'd be if missed the small paragraph in an email looking for students to participate in this program. ”

²⁴ Strategies/tools used in mentorship sessions included mock interviews, written and verbal approaches to disclosure accommodation conversations with employers, role-play for virtual meetings and email communication options.

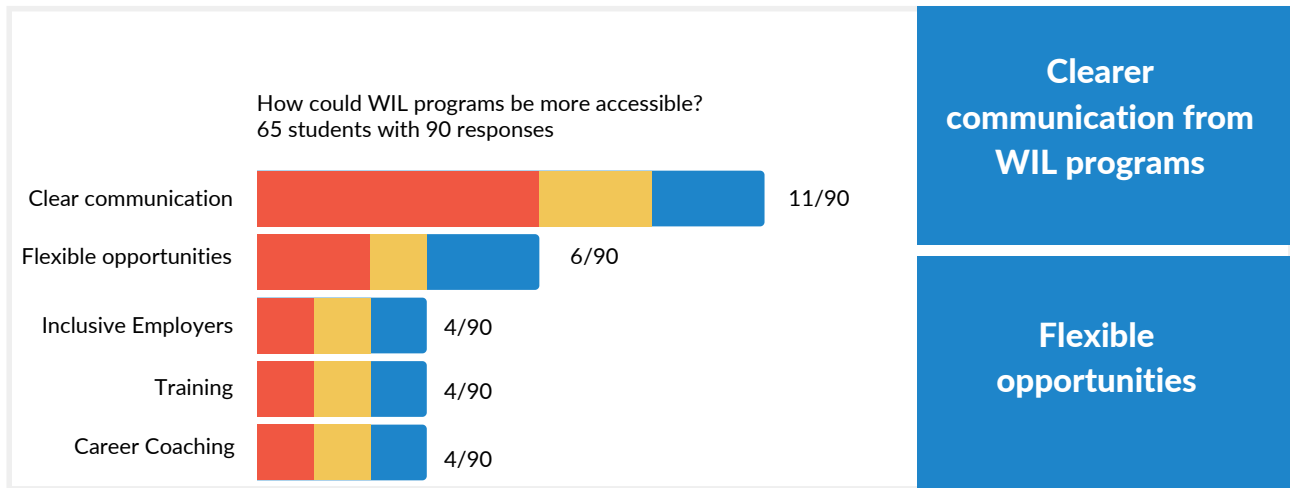
²⁵ Soft skills include time management, networking, teamwork, conflict management skills.

²⁶ Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common mental disorder. Symptoms include trouble focusing, concentrating or completing tasks, being easily distracted, problems organizing assignments/project, dealing with frustration, and transition or changes produce agitation, etc.). <https://www.healthline.com/health/adhd#types>

3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.4.1. Cont.: Students' experience with mentorship sessions

To get deeper insight, students were asked, *how could WIL programs be more accessible?* There was a 46 per cent (65/140) response rate with 90 answers.



Note: 61 out of the 90 answers provided indicated that students had no specific feedback. One respondent, however, did suggest that SFU should hiring staff who have knowledge and experience with disabilities.

Detailed feedback of the responses in the chart above regarding what would make WIL experiences more accessible, included:

Clearer communication that is consistent (marketing and email notifications) about opportunities, easily accessible and available information and resources.

More flexible and personalized opportunities—support and career coaching.

Improve inclusive recruitment and stronger relationships with employer.

Increase training and professional development opportunities.

Greater representation of people with disabilities in the workplace and events.

Ensure staff and speaker panels represent people with disabilities.

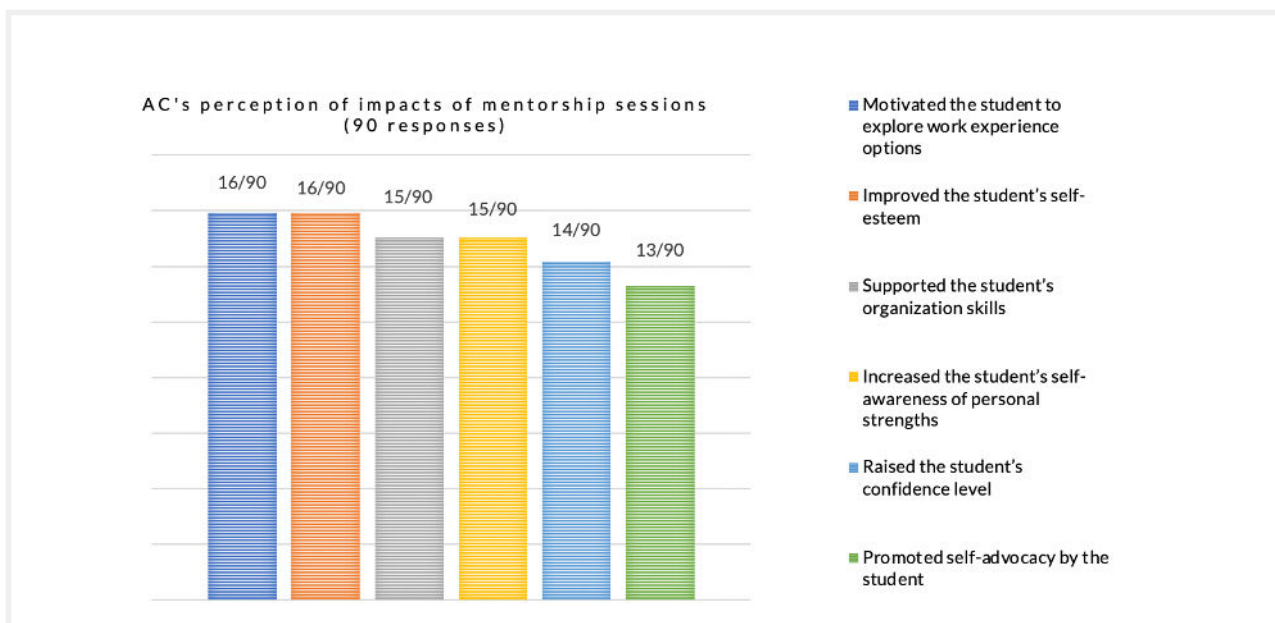
3. (Cont.) FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.4.2. Accessibility Coordinator's (AC) experience with mentorship sessions: documented observations of 23 students

The AC's observations added to the findings, noting: (1) SWD lacked or had low levels of self-advocacy skills and (2) mentees developed stronger problem-solving skills by supporting them to identify their needs and discussion of personal barriers. As one mentee noted:

"Not being able to self-advocate is a terrible space to be in, it is a place of shame and anxiety. Having the language for what I need and being able to hear myself say those words and to have someone witness that, is so valuable."

When the AC was asked the Project evaluation question, "[a]s a result of the mentorship session, I believe to have impacted the students in the following ways," 90 answers were provided.



Finally, the integration of disability and work services—case management model— between the AC, co-op and other campus staff to support and engage SWD in WIL programming functioned to:

- *Expand and improve knowledge* of available resources (e.g., Career Plan Model).
- *Increase access* by providing online resources developed specifically for SWD.
- *Provide invaluable personal/emotional support* for students' work search journey in a more robust way.

The following recommendations are the result of the findings from the literature review, online survey, mentorship testimonial questionnaire and results of the PSIs' Discussion Group. While the findings suggest greater support from PSIs' WIL programs, further research is needed on the layers of barriers SWD face (discussed in the "Further Research" section).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

“ ... disability type affects both access to PSE and labour market outcomes. Individuals with mental health, learning and physical disabilities are less likely to acquire a PSE credential and they experience worse labour market outcomes after PSE than other PSE graduates.²⁷ ”

The findings from this Project revealed the unique barriers and experiences of students with disabilities (SWD) and highlighted pathways for increasing participation in post-secondary institutions' (PSI) WIL programs, specifically:



4.1. Create PSIs' WIL policies, processes and resources at the institutional level to support and accommodate SWD, including:

Provide accessible grade point average (GPA) admission requirement and fee structures.²⁸

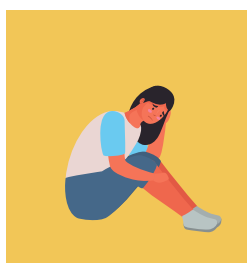
Develop and implement a campus-wide coordination system for providing resources between SFU-WIL (co-op), CAL and Student Services (including Health and Counselling).

Create a permanent WIL AC²⁹ position to work with co-op staff and employers to better support school-to-work transition, implement mentorship sessions, provide resources, promote WIL programs, and conduct greater outreach to employers and campus community.

Deliver inclusivity training and programs for WIL staff, practitioners and employers to increase competencies regarding SWD, accessibility and accommodation issues.

Develop a job-search database for students, staff and employers for uploading and accessing resumes (e.g., Indeed job search engine for SWD).

As one survey respondent noted:



“My grades dropped once I became disabled, and the CGPA requirement meant that I was unable to apply for co-op this semester. I find this process discriminatory ... grades can drop because of a disability and the co-op application does not reflect these types of personal struggles that often face students.”

²⁷ Chatoor, K. (2021). *Postsecondary Credential Attainment and Labour Market Outcomes for Ontario Students with Disabilities*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

<https://heqco.ca/pub/postsecondary-credential-attainment-and-labour-market-outcomes-for-ontario-students-with-disabilities/>

²⁸ Institutional policies could be carried out by identifying and implementing alternative ways beyond GPA to admit students into WIL programming and adopt individual-based fee structure.

²⁹ Hire a professional with education and lived disability-related experiences.

4. (Cont.) RECOMMENDATIONS



4.2. Increase multi-stakeholder collaboration to support and engage with SWD school-to-work transition, including:

Greater coordination between recruitment staff, disability related organizations, community agencies, inclusive employers and campus services, to develop and increase flexible employment and volunteer opportunities for SWD (i.e., work-from-home, specific internships/placements, etc.).

Provide resources to employers, for instance, “how to guides” (handbooks/toolkits) for creating accessibility policy, inclusive recruitment, onboarding and retention practices.

Create “Discussion Circles”³⁰ with representatives from businesses, disability-related organizations and community agencies to engage and share ideas of opportunities, current and best practices for creating accommodation and understanding of SWD in the workplace.



4.3. Earmark targeted resources to increase SWD participation in WIL programs, including:

“The development of programs and policies for students with disabilities needs to acknowledge that different disabilities pose different challenges for students.”³¹

Improve and customize training programs (i.e., universal design³²) to courses, training and professional development opportunities that include diverse strategies and ensure trainers and speakers have knowledge and lived experiences with disabilities.

Develop and implement advocacy training for SWD (strategies, tools and communication skills) to better prepare students for requesting disability accommodations, navigating disclosure conversations with WIL practitioners, co-workers and general public.

Create pre-employment courses based on the needs of SWD to support their transition from school-to-work—pre-vocational training, networking, leadership skills and career coaching (Individual Career Plan Model, ELeVATE³³, Co-op Self-Assessment Tool, SWING³⁴, etc.).

Provide specific professional development opportunities (workshops, seminars, etc.) that are flexible for SFU’s CAL students.

One of the benefits of PD is increased confidence through the development of skills and knowledge. Employers can benefit from providing PD since it promotes higher employee retention rates.³⁵

³⁰ Discussion circles could include the use of province-wide case studies as a method to address practical workplace adjustments.

³¹ Chatoor, K. (2021). Postsecondary Credential Attainment and Labour Market Outcomes for Ontario Students with Disabilities. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

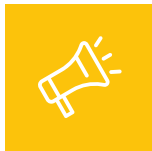
³² Universal design is based on creating an environment that extends access and inclusion to all students regardless of age, size, ability and/or disability.

³³ ELeVATE program incorporates multiple interventions: mentoring, academic and professional workshops, vocational counselling, etc.

³⁴ SWING Project is a student-centered approach based on infrastructure support. See Clouder, et al. (2019). The role of assistive technology in renegotiating the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education in North Africa. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(8), 1344–1357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1437721>

³⁵ The professional institute of the public service of Canada. (2021, June 5). What is career development and training <https://pipsc.ca/what-is-career-development-and-training>

4. (Cont.) RECOMMENDATIONS



4.4. Strengthen proactive communications systems, for example:

Develop and improve communication mechanisms for distributing clear and consistent information regarding the benefits of ACE-WIL and CEWIL equity, diversity and inclusion policies/practices, employment and other opportunities to SWD (e.g., a student resource bank).

Create a campus-wide awareness campaign on physical and non-physical disabilities (invisible and mental health) to raise awareness of professors/staff.

Improve outreach to employers for ongoing and effective communication with WIL staff, practitioners and more specifically, internship field/host supervisors.



4.5. Create post-graduation/career follow-up program

Ensure the continuation and extension of the mentorship program with a designated AC that includes post-graduation and WIL experience follow-up with check-in assessments, career coaching and counselling.

Increase outreach to employers (e.g., two-year post-WIL placement follow-up) to continually support employers in creating, and/or continuing and expanding opportunities and accommodation for SWD.

Other recommendations from SWD, include:

"Career counseling or workshops for people with disabilities to specifically help with barriers (not just resume writing, interview help, etc.)".

"Coaching on how to succeed in the workplace."

"More mental health workshops."

"Provide other opportunities that don't look at my GPA so I can develop more skills."

4. (Cont.) RECOMMENDATIONS

4.6. Further research

“ ... there are serious gaps in outcomes and experience for students with mental health, learning and physical disabilities, but without better data and more research, we cannot say for certain why we observe such stark differences in outcomes for students with these disabilities.³⁶ ”

The shift in project design, from in-person to online (due to COVID-19) had some positive outcomes such as increased engagement and creation of resources for SWD. A related study, however, revealed similar positive findings (increased work flexibility, decreased social barriers, navigating accommodations, etc.) but also challenges (students' uncertainty about course expectations, how to access support and difficulty focusing).³⁷

Given the contradictory studies of positive and negative impacts of the move to remote learning and work, deeper exploration is needed on the potential for increasing flexible opportunities, decreasing disability barriers (physical and invisible) and addressing workplace accommodation challenges (i.e., work-from-home).

Further research based on a multilayered approach is also needed to delve deeper into the intersections/connections (intersectionality) between and among societal norms (contexts) and identity. An intersectional approach to project design is crucial for gathering data for greater analysis of the layers of exclusion preventing SWD from engaging in WIL programs. When people, for instance, have multiple aspects of their identity marginalized (i.e., gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and ability) they face greater discrimination and barriers to participation in employment and other opportunities.

Keyword

Intersectionality refers to the connection/links between race, class, and gender as they intersect and create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage for an individual or group.³⁸

As one student noted:

"... the greatest barrier is often around being misgendered by coworkers, managers, and the public. This has happened in every work environment ... and most community spaces as well. I find that if I say anything about it little is done to make changes, and resentment grows in others who feel they are 'doing the best they can.'"

Finally, there is substantial research on the positive impacts of diversity for employers, for instance: “[c]ompanies with the highest levels of diversity (either gender, ethnic/ racial) are anywhere from 15-35% more likely to have financial returns ... ”³⁹

There tends to be a gap, however, in the inclusion of people with disabilities in general assumptions, definitions and resulting WIL programs and employers' EDI policies and accommodation practices. Deeper investigation and advocacy, therefore, on the benefits of including SWD in the workplace is needed.

³⁶ Chatoor, K. (2021). *Postsecondary Credential Attainment and Labour Market Outcomes for Ontario Students with Disabilities*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

³⁷ Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. (2020). New study examines how Covid-19 pandemic has amplified challenges for students with disabilities and offers recommendations for improving accessible remote learning. Stakeholder Summary.

³⁸ Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color Author(s): Kimberle Crenshaw Source *Stanford Law Review*, Jul., 1991, Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul., 1991), pp. 1241-1299 Published by: Stanford Law Review Stable. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039>

³⁹ Pete Evans. (2017, Jun 21). Why How much does gender inequality cost Canada? \$150B report finds. CBC News. www.cbc.ca/news/business/gender-equality-mckinsey-1.4169287

5. CONCLUSION

“ Surprisingly, 40% of post-secondary institutions [PSIs] have no reference to disability supports for career related activities and only 18% reference supports available for engaging in WIL on their websites. In addition, WIL practitioners are not receiving the resources nor training to support this demographic to transition from school to work. ⁴⁰ ”

This Project explored the unique experiences of students with disabilities (SWD) and uncovered avenues for increasing engagement in WIL program. It moved beyond the findings that students refrain from participating in co-op and other WIL opportunities due to disability and disclosure concerns and the Project's outcomes, to provide recommendations for post-secondary institutions' (PSIs) WIL programs, including:



Implement WIL policies, processes and resources at the institutional level—create a designated AC position, accessible GPA requirements and fee structure, campus-wide coordination and communication system, inclusive training for WIL staff/practitioners, and job search database for SWD.



Increase multi-stakeholder collaboration between WIL staff and employers to create a coordinated approach to supporting SWD, increase flexible employment options, greater distribution of "how to guides" and develop discussion circles.



Earmark specific resources—customize training programs, deliver advocacy training, create pre-employment courses, increase professional development opportunities, etc.

There have been negative and positive impacts of COVID-19. Therefore, further research is needed on the unique barriers and opportunities for SWD as the result of the move to online.

More research designed with a methodological framework (intersectional approach) that allows for in-depth data collection, to expose the layers of barriers faced by SWD—how physical and social environments intersect and overlap (gender, sexual identities, race, class, age, abilities, etc.) to cause multiple discrimination and bias.

The Project had positive and sustainable outcomes including the creation of an “Student Accessibility Resource,” a “Employer Resource Handbook” and a web page for public access. See [Appendix I](#) for a list of resources and a link to students' testimonials.

⁴⁰ Gatto, L., Heather, P., Luiza, A., et al. (2020, April 23). Work integrated learning resources for students with disabilities: are post-secondary institutions in Canada supporting this demographic to be career ready? [10.1108/HESWBL-08-2019-0106](https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-08-2019-0106).

APPENDIX I: EXPANDING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES WITH AN ACCESSIBILITY APPROACH RESOURCES

“***Student Accessibility Resource***,” an accessibility-centered approach to supporting SWD to help navigate their work-related journey. (Only available to SFU students through Canvas platform).

“***Employer Resource Handbook***,” a practical guide to support employers in engaging with their employees for increasing opportunities for SWD, from policy to retention, more inclusively. (Available on the SFU WIL website at: www.sfu.ca/wil/accessibility-student-resource.html)

A website page for publicly accessible information.
www.sfu.ca/wil/accessibility-student-resource.html

Students testimonials of their experience participating in the Project's mentorship sessions.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZU70xQuFo44&ab_channel=SFUCo-operativeEducation