

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

## Overview

"Ontario should...commit to ensure that every student has at least one experiential learning (EL) opportunity by the time they graduate from post-secondary education."

Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel report,  
recommendation 3-2

**Experiential learning (EL)** supports students in getting hands-on learning that helps them transition to employment. It also addresses employers' needs for new graduates to "hit the ground running." The Ontario government recognizes and values that postsecondary institutions provide many innovative student experiences that develop work and life-related skills and knowledge through a spectrum of interactive approaches, including EL.

In line with the Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel's recommendation, the government has committed to ensuring that every student has at least one EL activity by the time they graduate from a publicly funded postsecondary institution. The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) recognizes that having every student participate in EL will take time to achieve. As such, the government has established EL principles to guide progress and collective understanding of what counts as an EL activity.

This document provides the background on and an explanation of the ministry's EL principles, along with examples of EL activities. It also describes the state of the data to support PSE, employers, and other partners in expanding the number of EL activities for Ontario students. How to apply the principles is outlined in the document's final section.



## What do students think about EL?

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*"One of the core benefits of my [...] experience was the opportunity to realize that I had developed certain skills that could extend beyond my academic major. Most importantly, I realized the importance of transferrable skills and thus, my education no longer limited me but opened me up to a wide variety of career paths."*

”

- Megan Hsu, Life Sciences at McMaster

September 2017

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## *Background on the Principles*

The ministry has developed principles of experiential learning (EL) through extensive consultations with colleges, universities, employers, and students, to meet the needs of all EL partners.

These principles clearly reflect a common goal for EL: that students have greater access to high-quality, educational work-related experiences before they graduate. The principles draw on research and best practices in designing high-quality EL placements, while also including students' perspectives and priorities. Colleges and universities have advocated for flexibility, and these principles provide institutions with the opportunity to experiment and adapt a wide range of EL activities.

The principles have also been designed to support and align with the types of EL and work-integrated learning (WIL) being championed by employers. For example, the Business/Higher Education Roundtable of Canada (BHER) recently espoused a definition of WIL that includes nine types of activities.<sup>1</sup>

The principles and examples that follow are intended to allow educators and employers to innovate in creating new types of EL activities that provide greater flexibility and choice to students and increase equity of access to these opportunities across geographic regions and fields of study. The principles also align with BHER's best practices and recommendations to design with the outcome in mind, facilitate reflection, and adopt a common language.

1. Apprenticeships, co-ops, internships, mandatory professional practice, field experience, applied research projects, service learning, incubators/accelerators, and boot camps/hackathons.

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## *The Principles*



### 1 Postsecondary Supported, Workplace Linked

Experiential Learning (EL) at the postsecondary level is an educational activity facilitated and supported by a college or university through which students learn while doing. Students participate in workplaces, or simulated workplaces, where they are exposed to authentic demands and expectations. The goal of an EL experience is to improve students' employability and interpersonal skills and to support their transition to the workforce.

### 3 Compliant with Employment Laws

EL activities may or may not be paid, may take place on or off campus, and may or may not be directly funded by the government. EL opportunities must comply with all applicable laws and regulations including health and safety laws and regulations.

### 2 Meaningful, Structured, and Verified

EL allows students to engage in and reflect on structured, purposeful activities. EL also includes verification or evaluation (by the employer and/or institution) of the student's performance and learning outcomes. During EL experiences, students apply and expand on the program knowledge and / or essential employability skills<sup>2</sup> that they acquired during their studies and that are valued by the labour market and foster lifelong success.

### 4 Recognition

If obtained by a student as a part of their program of study, the EL experience must be verified or evaluated and count towards course credit or credential completion. If obtained by a student outside of their program, the EL experience must be verified or evaluated and formally recognized by the institution as meeting the EL principles above.

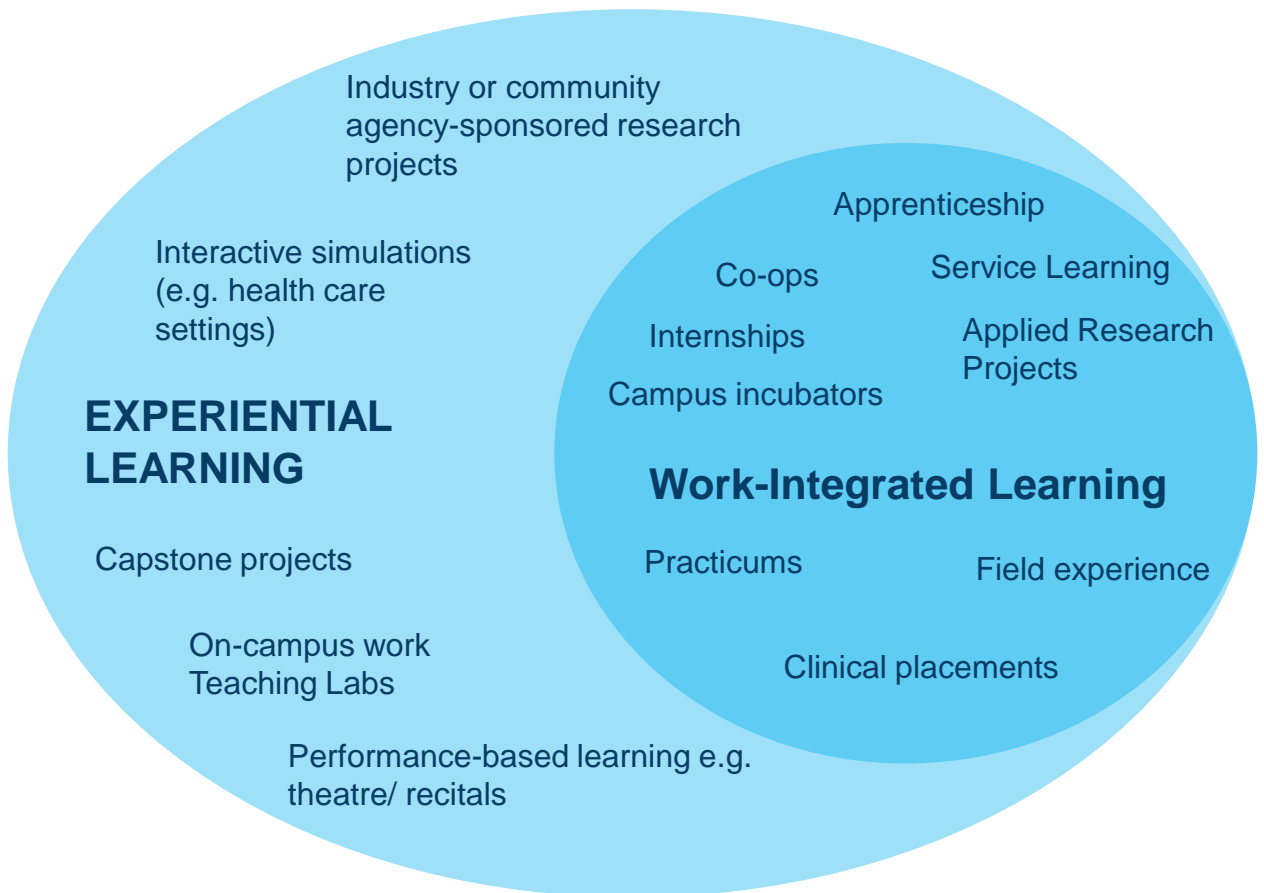
2. The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development is currently reviewing the list of skills with its partners.

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## *Examples*



There are many kinds of experiential learning, including what is referred to as work-integrated learning.<sup>3</sup> Experiential learning incorporates work-integrated learning but is broader in its recognition of how educational experiences can prepare students to thrive in the workforce. This broader recognition captures a wider range of activities that can be of benefit. See the Appendix for more detailed examples of some types of experiential learning.



3. WIL can be defined as “the process whereby students come to learn from experiences in educational and practice settings and integrate the contributions of those experiences in developing the understanding, procedures, and dispositions required for effective professional practice, including criticality.” S. Billet (2015) in M. Kennedy, S. Billet, S. Gherardi & L. Grealish (eds.) Practice-based learning in higher education: jostling cultures. (pp. v) New York: Springer.

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## *Data and Measurement*

The current level of experiential learning activity in Ontario at postsecondary institutions is not fully known. A 2014 report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) suggested that “more than two-thirds (68%) of Ontario college graduating students and almost half of university students (48%) were graduating with some form of work-integrated learning (WIL) experience.”

The ministry collects data on certain types of WIL at Ontario colleges, which indicate that 72.4% of 2014-2015 college graduates had access to at least one type of WIL experience in their program. However, data on WIL or EL (apart from co-op) has not been tracked at Ontario universities.

Other sources of data are not sufficiently comprehensive or reliable to provide a baseline of data on EL access and participation. The majority of available data on EL and WIL comes from national or international surveys (e.g., the National Graduate Survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement, or the Graduating Student Survey) that do not provide provincial metrics.

Having developed the EL principles, creating the necessary data collection infrastructure at the institutional and provincial levels is a vital next step in establishing reliable, Ontario-wide baseline measures in order to track EL activities. Developing a methodology to count and track student experiential learning opportunities is a government priority.

In the fall of 2017, a subcommittee on measuring experiential learning will provide advice to the government on how to best track student<sup>4</sup> participation in meaningful experiential learning opportunities at the postsecondary level.

4. Students include apprentices.

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## *How to Apply the Principles*

The ministry has developed an easy-to-use checklist for educators, employers, and other partners to help determine if an experiential learning opportunity meets the requirements of the principles. A number of examples of experiential learning are also provided. The checklist and examples are shown in the Appendix.

The ministry recognizes as “experiential learning” any activity that meets the requirements of the principles, or is reformed to meet these requirements.

For example, most writing-intensive courses do not necessarily take place in a workplace or simulated workplace; however, a journalism student could be receiving a simulated workplace experience via a writing-intensive course designed to simulate the workplace. In that case, and provided the experience met all of the other principles, the experience would count as experiential learning.

In addition, there are a significant number of valuable workplace experiences that students participate in during their postsecondary education, but that are not necessarily offered to them as part of their program.

To be counted as experiential learning, the learning outcomes of these experiences must be recognized by the postsecondary institution to the student’s academic program (e.g. through a final reflection assignment or by having the experience count for credit in an independent study course).

The ministry reminds all experiential learning partners (e.g., institutions, employers, etc.) to provide students with accessible EL experiences in inclusive environments.

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## Checklist



### What is the Goal?

Supporting students in getting the hands-on learning opportunities that help them transition to employment. It is also to address employers' needs for new graduates or young employees to "hit the ground running."

### What counts as an experiential learning activity?

For an experience to count, it must check these six boxes:



The student is in a workplace or simulated workplace.



The student is exposed to authentic demands that improve their employability, interpersonal skills, and transition to the workforce.



The experience is structured with purposeful and meaningful activities.



The student applies university or college program knowledge and/ or essential employability skills.



The experience includes student self-assessment and evaluation of the student's performance and learning outcomes by the employer and/or university/college.



The experience counts towards course credit or credential completion OR is formally recognized by the college or university as meeting the five criteria above.



#### Employment Laws

All opportunities must comply with all applicable laws and regulations including health and safety.



#### Access

Experiential learning partners are reminded to provide students with accessible EL experiences in inclusive environments.



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## Examples

*Experiential learning takes many forms. Here are a range of illustrative examples. All EL activities will need to satisfy the checklist on the previous page.*

**Apprenticeships:** Students are sponsored by an employer as part of the cabinetmaker trade program.

**Performance and Artistic Productions:** Young artists and dancers organize and participate in an annual student art showcase that attracts industry representatives.

**Bootcamps/ Hackathons:** Students develop a workable solution to a technology, data, or design problem, supported by mentors or peers.

**Clinical Placements:** Nursing students receive practical training at local health centres.

**Co-Ops:** Computer engineering students alternate four-month school terms and four-month paid work terms with technology companies.

**Field Experience and Placements:** Criminology and Criminal Justice students are offered field placements at a correctional facility or victim services agency, etc.

**Incubators and Accelerators:** Students build a start-up company, working in a campus-linked incubator.

**Industry-Sponsored Research Projects:** Students are approached by a fitness company to create a virtual personal training app to track workouts.

**Job Shadowing:** A Paramedic program offers students supervised ride-out time in an ambulance with a requirement to complete 450 hours.

**Mandatory Professional Practice:** For an Aviation Operations program, students complete their Industry Canada radio license by working at an airport.

**Practicums:** Early Childhood Education students complete practice teaching courses to gain in-class experience in a public school.

**Service Learning:** Students in a Peace Studies program participate in voluntary placements aimed at helping acclimatize refugees as part of a course on community peace building.

**Workplace Simulations:** Students in a Dental Hygiene program practice on life-like patient models in a model clinic.

**Work-Study Programs:** Library Science students participate in paid work experiences in a campus library.

*And any other comparable activity that meets the checklist on the previous page.*