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Media Release

Making work-integrated learning a reality at colleges and universities

Study says stricter adherence to guidelines is needed

ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 23, 2014 — Colleges and universities need to adhere to strict guidelines if they want to make a success of work-integrated learning, says a study by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

That includes making sure work placements are relevant, supervised and – if that’s what they are supposed to be – paid.

Richard Wiggers is HEQCO’s executive director, research and programs. At the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, he is presenting an overview of a five-year research study into work-integrated learning. The study included surveys of faculty, employers, and a longitudinal study of thousands of Ontario postsecondary students.

Wiggers said employers, when hiring university or college graduates, tend to favour those with work experience.

“They are looking not just for credentials,” he said, “but for evidence that the person has been able to apply their skills in something like the real world.”

Experience can come from a summer job or a part-time job, or it can come from a field placement, internship, co-op program or other program directly related to a person’s studies.

For that reason, post-secondary educators are looking into ways to incorporate work experience into education.

Wiggers says the study has shown that work-integrated learning works best if it adheres to certain criteria.





For example, he says a co-op student doesn't just disappear from the university for four months to go off and work.

"What's supposed to happen is there are supposed to be site visits to the place of employment, and there's supposed to be a plan linked to planned learning outcomes. And there's supposed to be an assessment and a link back to their studies."

But universities and colleges reported having difficulty in finding placements for students – particularly after the 2008 financial crisis – and also difficulty in finding quality placements. Wiggers says that in the rush to find placements, the criteria for a good placement are often forgotten.

For example, co-op work placements are supposed to be paid.

But Wiggers said the survey showed that of the students who claimed to have done a co-op placement, 8 per cent of those at the university level, and 50 per cent of those at the college level, reported that they did not get paid.

"We have to rethink the criteria we are using," said Wiggers. "If we're going to call it a co-op program, we have to make sure we're following the co-op guidelines. There's a set of criteria that must be met for something to be called a coop. And one criteria is that co-op work is supposed to be paid."

Wiggers says that to help mitigate the problem of finding placements, employers also need to be more involved with the process.

"If we are doing experiential learning, we have to remind ourselves what the criteria are supposed to be. We have to make sure we are providing learning opportunities that are really valuable. Because the sooner the people experience the world outside the classroom, the more beneficial it is."

The final report on the study is due out in the fall.

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Organized by the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Congress is the largest interdisciplinary conference in Canada, and one of the largest in the world. Congress brings together 75 academic associations that represent a rich spectrum of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, theatre, film studies, education, music, sociology, geography, social work and many others. For more information, go to www.congress2014.ca

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