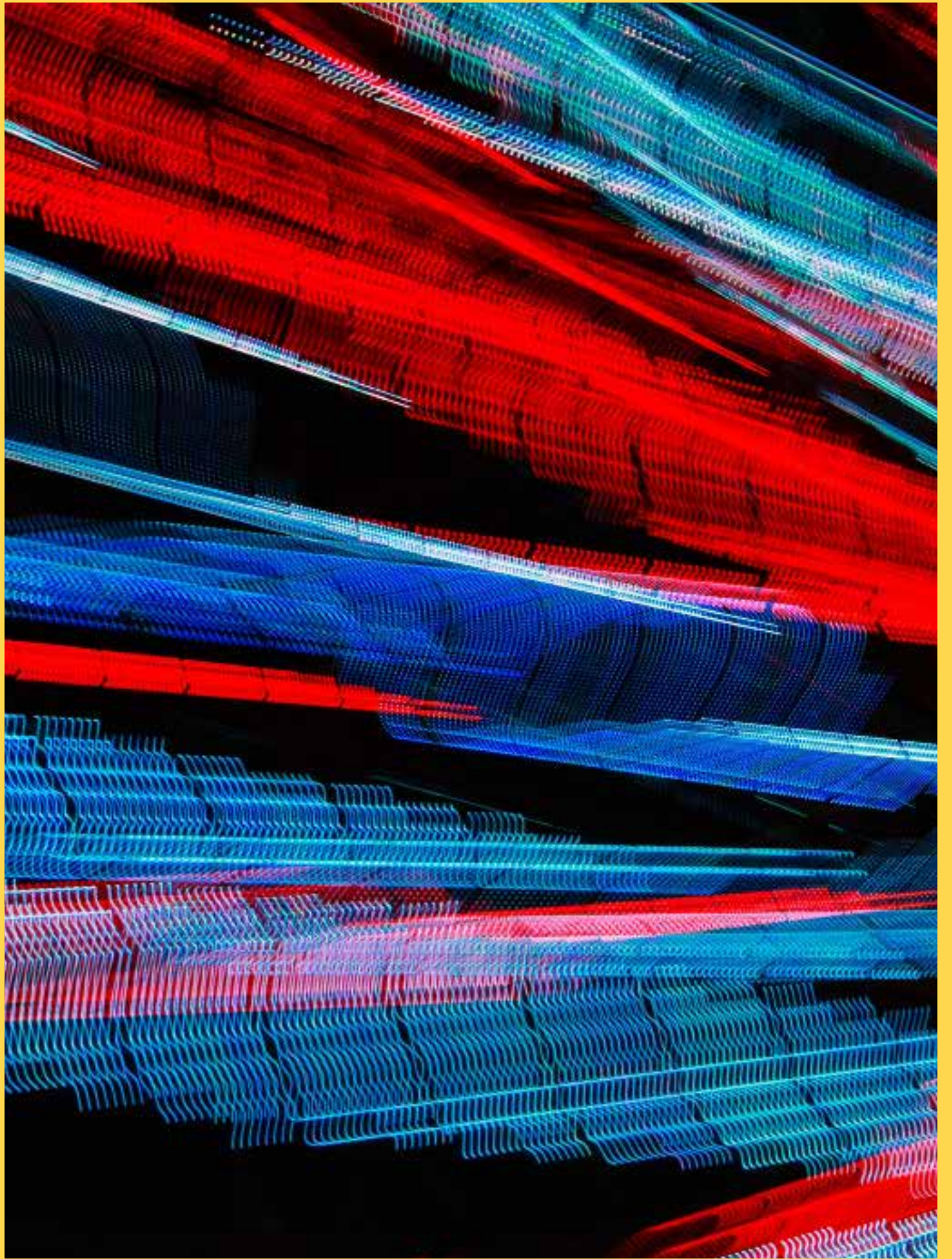# TAKE A AAA APPROACH TO WORK–INTEGRATED LEARNING

What's inside

TAKE A AAA APPROACH TO WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

In many parts of the world, including Canada, there are calls for an increase in the number of work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for post-secondary students. WIL combines classroom learning with work experience – preparing students with skills and experience they need to be successful in the workforce. As attention is paid to increase the number of WIL programs, providers and policymakers need to pay attention to the quality of WIL experiences for key stakeholders to ensure the impact of these key education offerings for the 21st century.

In 2019, there were 1.4 million students enrolled in Canadian universities. With those numbers expected to increase every year, competition between students is fierce, but they're not the only ones who are competing to stand out. The pressure is on businesses as much as universities – both need to attract the best and the brightest. So, how do you do it?

THE WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING ADVANTAGE

It comes down to creating a learning experience that offers value to students, one that can prepare them for life outside of the classroom. WIL allows students to gain practical work experience in their fields of study, giving them the skills needed to be successful in industry and at the same time, an edge over other graduates entering the workforce.

Students see their education as an investment and they expect a high return on that investment. The Government of Canada sees the economic value of WIL as a way of supporting youth as they transition from college and university to the labour market, investing $1.1 billion since 2015. The 2019 budget dedicated almost $800 million to WIL, drawing even more attention to the benefits it offers students, businesses and academic institutions.

There are many stakeholders involved and a lot of money invested, but not every WIL program is the same. Not all yield the same results because the quality of programs can vary. To make the most of your company's investment in work-integrated learning, consider this research-based framework:

APPLY THE AAA WIL QUALITY FRAMEWORK

University of Waterloo's WIL Quality Framework outlines three critical elements for a successful work-integrated learning program. Waterloo calls it the AAA approach:

1. Define the **Aims** of all the stakeholders
2. Implement the **Actions** required to accomplish those goals
3. Evaluate the **Achievements** of all stakeholders

1 | DEFINE THE AIMS

What are the WIL goals for each stakeholder group? There are five major stakeholders to consider when answering this question: students, employers, educators, academic institutions and governments.

Students look at WIL as an opportunity to develop invaluable work experience in their fields of study while, in most cases, provides maintaining financial independence through meaningful employment.

For employers, WIL is an opportunity to cultivate their future workforce in a cost-effective way. Student employees are highly motivated, educated in the latest research and can hit the ground running when they graduate because they've built essential business skills.

Educators can monitor and improve courses and programs to ensure that content is relevant and prepares students for life after school, while academic institutions can use WIL to benchmark and market their performance through the employment rates of their graduates.

As for governments, they want to ensure taxpayer dollars are being invested in programs and institutions that produce engaged citizens who will build a successful economy.

These are just a few, high-level goals for each group. Although the individual aims of stakeholders differ, they depend on each other to achieve mutual success.

2 | IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS

Collaboration between stakeholders in WIL programs is key. That means working together to implement actions that will achieve everyone's goals. First and foremost, students need to be prepared for their workplace experiences. Their success will be reflected in their ability to apply theory in practice, understand the workplace culture, develop their professional network and ultimately find post-graduation employment in the field of their choice. A good way to measure the impact of a work experience is through a work report by the student. These reports offer insights and reflections on what the student learned during their experience and how it's relevant to their studies.

Employers are responsible for creating successful experiential learning opportunities by providing meaningful work that aligns with the curriculum. Providing ongoing support and mentoring for students is also a critical element in successful WIL programs. Evaluations of students by supervisors and exit interviews with students can provide insightful feedback on what's working well and what parts of the WIL experience can be improved. What this translates to is a more desirable work environment that's reflected in the number of applications received for both student roles and full-time employment.

Academic institutions have a responsibility to develop relationships with employers who will provide positive experiences for students in their fields of study. They need to evolve WIL programs based on feedback from students and employers, in order to meet the changing needs and expectations of society. Student performance in both the classroom and the workplace provides objective data on the success of WIL programs. This is reflected in statistics such as student enrolment rates in courses and programs, student retention rates, graduate employment rates, how quickly graduates find employment in their fields of study and starting salary averages.

Governments can facilitate the implementation of actions through the funding of WIL, tax credits for participating employers and the development of policies that will meet the needs of all stakeholders to promote quality WIL programs. Key measurements of successful WIL programs that governments track are student loan and repayment rates, as well as visa applications of international students who finished their studies and now want to start contributing to the Canadian economy.

2 | EVALUATE THE ACHIEVEMENTS

Finally, it all comes down to critical self-evaluation. Developing a process for continuous improvement is the differentiator for quality WIL programs. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) need to be applied throughout the WIL experience to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement at every stage. As the needs and expectations of stakeholders evolve with time, adjusting WIL aims, actions and achievements based on KPIs will ensure the WIL ecosystem is strong for all stakeholders.

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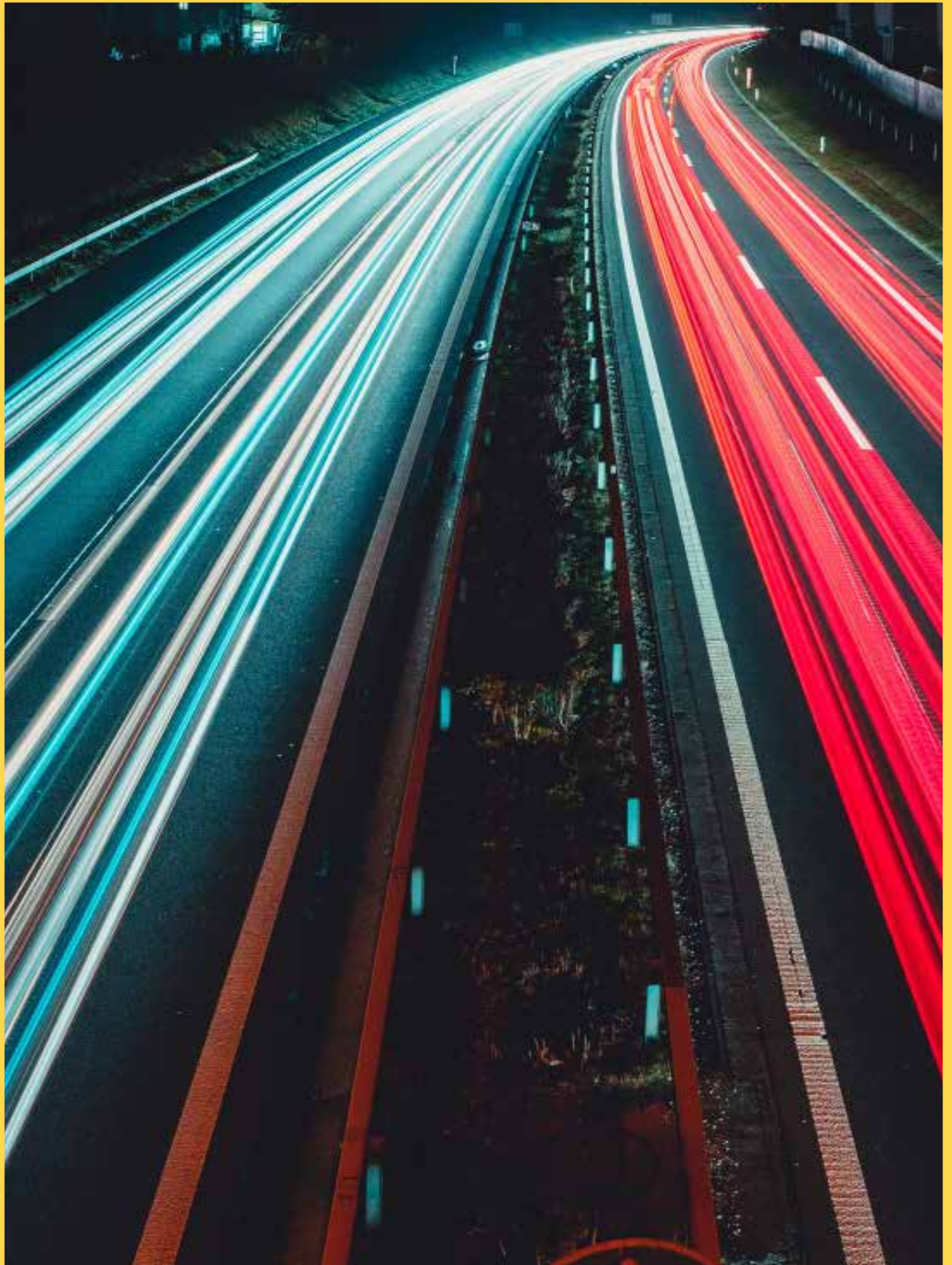
THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO EXAMPLE

The University of Waterloo is a pioneer in WIL. Established in 1957, in conjunction with local industrialists, the University's goal was to produce the highly skilled workforce of tomorrow. From the outset, Waterloo understood the importance of translating theory into practice in order to move society forward. Creating the first co-op program in Canada was fundamental to achieving that goal.

The WIL Quality Framework is based on decades of research and experience in this field and demonstrates Waterloo's commitment to WIL by helping others follow Waterloo's model. A focus on quality has taken the Waterloo co-op program from humble beginnings to a world-renowned WIL program that $525 million in employer gains in 2018/2019 – in fact, for every $1 a business invests in a co-op student, they see a $2 economic gain (Deloitte Canada, 2019). What's more, 96 per cent of the University's co-op graduates are employed within the first six months of graduation in roles related to the skills they acquired during their studies.

96%

OF WATERLOO CO-OP GRADUATES ARE EMPLOYED WITHIN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF GRADUATION IN ROLES RELATED TO THE SKILLS THEY ACQUIRED DURING THEIR STUDIES

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WIL QUALITY FRAMEWORK CHECKLIST FOR BUSINESSES

How does your WIL program stack up? Take a look at Waterloo's checklist to see if you're on the right track.

If you're interested in joining the University of Waterloo's co-op network of over 7,000 employers from around the world, get in touch at uwaterloo.ca/hire.

LEARN MORE | UWATERLOO.CA/HIRE

Learn more about how a University of Waterloo co-op student can make a difference in your organization.

The employer's checklist

BEFORE WIL EXPERIENCE

☐ Engage with the educational partner to share your aims and learn about the WIL programs that suit your needs

☐ Define your expectations, possibly through a job posting, so that students can assess their fit for the WIL role

☐ Highlight what the student will learn within your organization and describe the culture and environment of your business

☐ Depending on the program, participate in a screening and selection process to recruit your WIL student

DURING WIL EXPERIENCE

☐ Designate someone to provide support to the WIL student – a recent graduate could relate with the student

☐ Engage the student with impactful work and help them understand the connection between their work and the goals of the organization

☐ Provide regular feedback to the student on what's going well and what could be improved

☐ Reach out to your educational partner if a challenging situation arises and you need their help

AFTER WIL EXPERIENCE

☐ Provide a formal assessment of the student's performance to the educational partner

☐ Conduct an exit interview with the student and encourage them to share feedback on how to improve WIL experiences within your organization

☐ Connect with your educational partner and review your WIL experiences (e.g. hiring history), discuss potential changes and prepare for your next WIL experiences

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WATERLOO