

ADVANCING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING QUALITY: THE UPDATED AAA★ QUALITY FRAMEWORK

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INTRODUCTION

The AAA★ Quality Framework was established in 2018 in response to a growing interest in work-integrated learning (WIL). As governments and higher education institutions increased their investments in WIL, maintaining the quality of WIL programs became a critical concern. To address this need, the AAA★ Quality Framework was developed to clarify the components of quality WIL, enable standards for all forms of WIL, and provide guidance to all partners in the WIL experience.

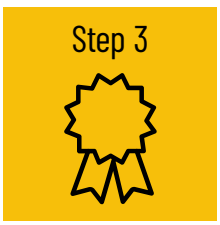
Since its initial publication, the Framework has been used around the world to support the development and evaluation of high-quality WIL programs. It follows the AAA★ approach, which outlines three key steps to be taken when considering quality WIL:



Define the **AIMS** of all partners in the WIL experience



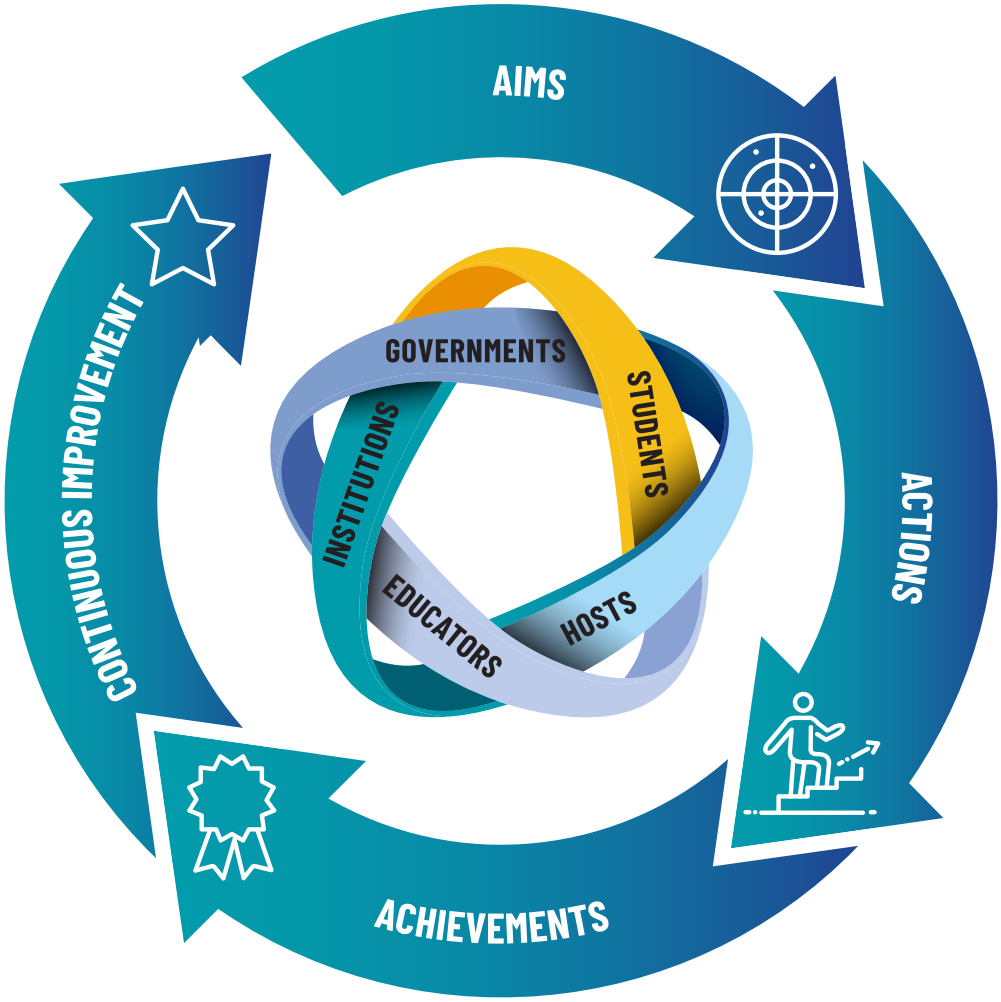
Identify and implement the **ACTIONS** required to accomplish those goals



Evaluate the **ACHIEVEMENTS** of all partners in the WIL experience

The star (★) represents continuous improvement, highlighting the importance of regularly revisiting the aims, actions, and achievements of each partner to ensure WIL programs remain responsive to changing needs and priorities.

What sets the AAA★ Quality Framework apart is its focus on quality at the program level and its ecosystem approach to understanding quality in WIL. The framework recognizes that effective WIL depends on the contributions and interactions of five key partners: **students, host organizations/employers, educators, academic institutions, and government**. These partners must work together to ensure high-quality WIL, and each step of the AAA★ process should incorporate their diverse perspectives.



The Framework is designed to be an adaptable tool for assessing quality, enabling its application across all types of WIL, including community and industry research & projects, apprenticeship, co-operative education, entrepreneurship, field placement, internships, mandatory professional practicum/clinical placement, service learning, and work experience.

While the original framework continues to provide a strong foundation for understanding and evaluating WIL quality, the world of work has changed significantly since 2018. As new challenges and priorities have emerged, it became important to revisit the framework to ensure it continues to reflect current research, practice, and the evolving needs of WIL partners.

UPDATING THE AAA★ QUALITY FRAMEWORK

The AAA★ Quality Framework was designed to be a living document – one that evolves alongside emerging research and best practices in the field of WIL. In recent years, the employment landscape has undergone profound transformation. Globalization, changing demographics, and rapid technological advancements have reshaped the labour market at an unprecedented pace and scale. In response, WIL programs have adapted to better prepare students for the realities of today's workforce. **As WIL continues to evolve, the frameworks used to guide WIL quality must also adapt.** Recognizing this, we saw a need to update the AAA★ Quality Framework to reflect emerging topics and challenges currently facing WIL programs.

To update the framework, we reviewed recent research on WIL and the future of work. This review identified five topics that are increasingly recognized as important to WIL quality that were not prominently featured in the original Framework. These topics include:

Equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA)
Ensuring WIL opportunities are equitable and accessible for all students.

Future of work preparation
Preparing students for the changing world of work, including new technologies and the rise of remote work.

Practitioner development
Supporting WIL practitioners through ongoing professional development opportunities.

Student well-being
Promoting student well-being and ensuring appropriate support and resources are available.

Supervisor training
Equipping WIL supervisors with the training and resources they need to effectively mentor and support WIL students.

After identifying these key topics, we reviewed the literature to identify actionable recommendations for supporting high-quality WIL experiences. These recommendations, along with updated references to recent WIL research, have been integrated throughout the framework. Importantly, the update does not change the overall structure of the framework. Instead, it strengthens and expands the original framework by incorporating emerging topics related to quality WIL.

THE AAA★ QUALITY FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

Whether you are a WIL practitioner, educator, employer, or policymaker, the AAA★ Quality Framework provides a practical tool for strengthening the quality of WIL programs. If you have used the Framework before, it's important to note that the core components remain the same. The Framework continues to emphasize the five key partners in the WIL experience, and the three essential steps of defining the AIMS, implementing the ACTIONS, and evaluating the ACHIEVEMENTS. What has been updated is the content within each step to reflect recent developments in WIL research and practice.

The AAA★ Quality Framework is designed to be used across a wide range of WIL contexts. As a result, there is no single set of aims, actions, or achievements that define quality WIL in all circumstances. The examples below show how the framework can be used in practice by considering the perspectives and contributions of all WIL partners. Although the examples highlight common aims, actions, and achievements for each partner, they are not exhaustive. Instead, they are intended to help the reader identify the considerations that may be most relevant to their own WIL context.





STEP 1

DEFINE THE AIMS

The first question that needs to be considered is, what are the WIL goals for each partner group?

Students often view WIL as an opportunity to develop meaningful work experience in their field of study, explore career interests, apply academic learning in real-world settings, and build professional networks.

For employers, WIL provides an opportunity to cultivate their future workforce in a cost-effective way. WIL students are also often highly motivated, bring fresh and innovative ideas, and are educated in the latest research, positively impacting organizational culture.

Educators use WIL to enhance the overall learning experience for their students, helping them to connect theory and practice. Academic institutions can use WIL to improve graduate employability outcomes, improve student engagement and retention, and develop or strengthen relationships with community and industry partners.

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 each partner may differ, they depend on each other to achieve mutual success.



STEP 2

IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS

Collaboration between the partners engaged 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, and they must engage in reflection on their learning experiences.

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.

Educators and/or academic institutions have a responsibility to develop relationships with employers who will provide positive experiences for students in their fields of study. Academic institutions need to provide relevant support to educators, employers, and students to ensure successful WIL experiences. They also need to evolve WIL programs based on feedback from students and employers to meet the changing needs and expectations of society.

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 partners to promote quality WIL programs.



STEP 3
EVALUATE THE ACHIEVEMENTS

Finally, it is important to evaluate whether the intended outcomes have been achieved.

For students, 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. A good way to measure the impact of a work experience is through self-report surveys or assessments. Key performance indicators can also be used when exploring graduate outcomes.

For employers, 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. Employers can also engage in HR monitoring to examine the impacts of WIL on workforce development.

For educators and academic institutions, 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, and starting salary averages.

For government, surveys can be linked to tax records to explore post-graduation labour

market participation. Surveys can also be used to examine debt load and repayment of student loans.

While these evaluation approaches may differ across partner groups, they all serve a common purpose: generating evidence to strengthen and improve WIL programs over time. The true value of evaluation lies in using these insights to inform future planning, refine practices, and support ongoing quality enhancement across WIL programs.

The updated AAA★ Quality Framework provides a practical roadmap for continuous improvement. By regularly defining aims, implementing actions, and evaluating achievements, WIL partners can identify strengths, address emerging challenges, and adapt programs to meet the changing needs of students, workplaces, and society. This helps WIL programs maintain quality and stay responsive to changing needs.