

ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT

February 2024

WUSA ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT:

Experiential Education – Co-op

ISSUE: Ensuring University of Waterloo students have access to meaningful, accessible, discrimination-free, and safe co-op opportunities and work environments while ensuring access and availability of supports throughout the recruitment, work, and post-work periods.

RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY:

- University of Waterloo
- Federal Government
- Government of Ontario
- Employers
- Students

DETAILS:

The University of Waterloo is home to Canada's largest co-op program, with over 26,000 full-time undergraduate co-op students and access to over 7500 employers from 60 countries. Co-op students complete their academic studies with two-years of work experience already under their belt and 96% of employed co-op grads find jobs related to their skills gained at Waterloo within 6 months after graduation.

Despite these significant opportunities, students encounter unique challenges in securing meaningful and relevant co-op experiences. Students have expressed that they face unequal co-op opportunities, with non-STEM students often encountering fewer opportunities. Moreover, students may experience challenges in securing meaningful and relevant co-op placements. Additionally, students face various vulnerabilities, ranging from navigating the recruitment, work, and post-work periods.

There are also challenges concerning broad factors of affordability. International students are disproportionately impacted by these challenges and often experience higher rates of workplace discrimination.

Recent market developments also have implications for co-op opportunities as the technology sector has seen large post-pandemic layoffs, and general strikes and an overall dip in the domestic market has led to a decrease in the availability of jobs for students.

Establishing a comprehensive understanding of these issues requires acknowledging the underlying structural factors that impact the co-op experience. Housing shortages accompanied by increased costs of housing, food insecurity stemming from increased food prices, and increased costs limiting access to transport options negatively limit the number of accessible co-op options students have. These factors can have negative impacts on students' physical and mental well-being, hindering student co-op performance and experience.

For many students, discrimination during the hiring and work phases and through everyday lived experience pose additional and compounding barriers to their experiential education experience. Moreover, for some students, co-op jobs serve as a crucial form of financial support which they depend on to meet financial needs.

Due to the persistent affordability and accessibility challenges in housing, students face significant struggles. Additionally, a study published in the Canadian Food Studies Journal consistently reports that food insecurity rates among students ranging from 30 to 40 percent. Moreover, they encounter notable discrimination during hiring and recruiting processes in the workplace. Students can also face the challenge of adjusting to potentially steep learning curves and new work cultures and environments.

All these issues have implications for the mental and physical well-being of students and impact student performance, financial and logistical concerns, accessibility, and overall student satisfaction with work terms.

The co-op issues students face can be categorized into three (3) main domains:

1. Unequal co-op opportunities among students
2. Student vulnerabilities

3. Barriers Faced by International Students in Co-op Programs

IMPACT / ANALYSIS:

Unequal Co-op Opportunities

The significance of Experiential Learning (EL) is widely recognized. However, recent feedback from undergraduate students shed light on challenges within the co-operative and experiential education programs.

Ensuring job accessibility for all students is crucial. Students in specific faculties feel compelled to create their own opportunities due to limited options. Perceived disparities in job availability, particularly between STEM and Arts/Humanities, have been highlighted, with most opportunities favouring Engineering and Computer Science. Additionally, concerns were raised about limitations in accessing certain placements based on citizenship and funding support, particularly roles available only to students receiving OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program).

Students have identified critical elements for a meaningful co-op experience, including continuity, trust-building, prolonged engagement, and longer co-op durations for deep project involvement. Building connections and gaining exposure to other departments with the parent organization were also highlighted as crucial aspects, along with receiving feedback.

A report created by Deloitte, aimed at understanding generation Z, highlights that while salary matters, this generation values alignment of organizational values with their own. Aligning job descriptions with actual tasks assigned to students is essential for accurate work expectations and meaningful experiences, preventing students from being placed in unfair and unequal positions.

Addressing these concerns is crucial to ensuring a more equitable and enriching co-operative education system. Bridging the gap in job availability, enhancing accessibility, mitigating geographical challenges, and aligning pay levels with co-op experience are essential steps. In addition, the university should enhance its vetting and screening processes for employers within our system to ensure they have robust policies

safeguarding our student employees, including explicit coverage of workplace safety issues such as sexual harassment. Recognizing and promoting elements contributing to a meaningful co-op experience such as continuity and deeper involvement will elevate the overall quality of co-operative education.

Student Vulnerabilities

Navigating ever-changing and often challenging job markets, with unfamiliar workplaces, puts co-op students in a unique position, compared to their regular-stream peers. The co-op cycle, split between recruiting terms and work terms, presents several challenges, including balancing job-hunting with academic deadlines, securing affordable housing near work placements, managing finances for tuition and living costs, and navigating workplaces not regulated by familiar university policies. The high variability, coupled with the lack of coverage for co-op under the Employment Standards Act, leaves students highly vulnerable. A work environment that fosters psychological safety allows individuals to freely express thoughts, opinions and concerns without negative consequences. Without the protection of this act, co-op student rights are unclear, and work placements may pose issues regarding physical, mental and psychological safety (OUSA Student Entrepreneurship, Employment and Employability, 2022).

As the workforce continues to navigate a hybrid and flexible work environment, this continues to impact our student demographic. Students are in unique situations as they transition back and forth between studying and working, adding financial and accessibility pressures. Depending on where students secure their co-op placements, concerns about relocation, commuting and connections new cities or locations become financially concerning for students.

Compensation and geographical placement are two factors influencing decisions, applicable not only to co-op students but to all individuals. Affordability, according to the WUSA Representative Survey Platform's Advocacy survey, is 1.6 times the priority for students enrolled in a co-op program vs. students who are not. It is essential to differentiate between co-op and regular stream students. The same survey finds that 51.45% of co-op students, compared to only 35.83% of their regular-stream peers, are concerned with finding housing, compounded by the rotation between academic terms and work terms that occurs every 4-8 months.

These vulnerabilities leave gaps in experiential education that can be addressed through resources and processes developed to support students enrolled in co-op programs. These resources should be equitable to the four employment equity groups identified under the Employment Equity Act (women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, members of visible minorities), as well as timely to work favourably with existing timelines and deadlines that influence enrollment and housing.

A student who receives adequate support, possesses the skills to navigate a workplace effectively, and has access to the protections provided by the Employment Standards Act, is better positioned for success.

Barriers Faced by International Students in Co-op Programs

International students encounter distinct challenges within the co-op process compared to domestic students. For instance, they often lack access to certain co-op job opportunities funded through Canada's Student Work Placement Program (SWPP) which primarily target citizens and permanent residents or imposes hiring criteria excluding international students. This limits international students' access to work and experiential learning opportunities, impedes career and skills development, affects income, and can hamper the ability to secure employment post-graduation.

While domestic students pay an average tuition of \$7,000 per year, international students pay substantially more, averaging \$38,000, for comparable programs. Consequently, access to co-op opportunities becomes a key concern for international co-op students when concerning questions of affordability and well-being.

Employers lack the sufficient incentives to hire international students. Concerns associated with the lengthy and complex process of securing the necessary documentation and paperwork for international students to work deter employers from hiring them, given the associated risks and complexities.

International students are especially vulnerable to racial and gender-based discrimination. According to statistics published by the Federal Anti-racist Secretariat, employers are approximately 40 per cent more likely to interview applicants with English-sounding names, increasing instances where international students may encounter hiring discrimination.

It is crucial to note that international students may be less inclined to report instances of harassment in fear of facing workplace repercussions, unfamiliarity with local laws, limited access to legal services, and concerns over potential discrimination and dismissal from the police.

In response to the significant challenges international students face in various aspects of their lives, the IRCC has recently committed to the following:

- Managing a backlog of study, co-op and work permit applications
- From November 15,2022 until December 31,2023, lifting the 20-hours-per-week work restriction for international students in Canada who have off-campus work authorization on their study permit
- Allowing international students to start working co-op positions while waiting for their co-op work permit application to be processed.
- While international students wait for their co-op work permit applications to be processed, students can start working co-op positions
- Ensuring confirmation letters of acceptance to accredited academic institutions as to avoid enrolment scams and protect international students
- Launching a pilot program to automate study permit renewals

However, initiatives led by IRCC significantly lack an appropriate response to the unique challenges faced by international students and their experiences with co-op. This largely points to a Federal-government attitude that views international students as an economic investment for Canada without providing students the necessary supports that value their well-being and focus on retaining students.

Lastly, it is important to recognize larger factors like housing and transportation, accessibility and affordability, food insecurity, and mental and physical disproportionately impact international students.

POSITION / RECOMMENDATION(S):

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student's Association supports initiatives that encourage:

- job accessibility for all students, regardless of faculty or background.

- advocating for equitable treatment for co-op students, including protection under the Employment Standards Act.
- advocating for the rights and well-being of co-op students in terms of physical, mental, and psychological safety.
- enhancing co-op accessibility, initiatives to bridge geographical challenges, align pay levels with co-op experience, and provide explicit onboarding processes covering workplace safety, including sexual harassment awareness, between the University and employers.
- initiatives that promote equal co-op opportunities across all disciplines, addressing disparities between STEM and Arts/Humanities, and ensuring job accessibility for all students.
- supporting international students in co-op by advocating for policies and initiatives that enable better access co-op opportunities, addressing barriers related to work permits and funding restrictions, and implementing targeted support systems that focus on the unique challenges faced by international students, focusing on housing, discrimination and work permit processing.

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student's Association opposes initiatives involving:

- limitations in accessing placements based on citizenship and funding support.
- neglecting the unique challenges faced by co-op students in balancing academics and work.
- overlooking the importance of equitable treatment and protection for co-op students under relevant legislation.

ATTACHMENT(S):

[RSP Affordability](#)

[OUSA Student Entrepreneurship, Employment, & Employability Policy](#)

<https://stlawyers.ca/blog-news/layoffs-in-canada/>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/year-of-strike-2023-historic-1.7042081>

<https://universityaffairs.ca/opinion/in-my-opinion/student-food-insecurity-a-problem-before-during-and-after-covid-19/>

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