

# INTRODUCTION

A different kind of learning occurs when there is no exam to study for, no essay to write – just the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills that have been learned to a real life project. From medicine to engineering and fine arts, experiential learning is where curiosity gets tested in the real world.

Applied, or work-integrated, learning is one of the fastest-growing areas for universities in Ontario, a testament to its tremendous value to students and employers. It began with practicums for students in health sciences, expanded later to those studying business and engineering, and today, spans all disciplines and faculties with hundreds of programs on university campuses. Through internships, co-op programs, community service learning and placements, students are working in businesses, sports franchises, community organizations and international development agencies. Students can also acquire experiential learning through programs on campus that encourage them to take on roles such as investment managers, campaign planners and entrepreneurs.

The benefits of these programs reach far beyond the individual experience – many thousands of students have found full-time employment in their fields of study as a result of the experiential learning opportunities gained during their university education. Since many employers require prospective employees to have two to five years of experience on their resumes, applied learning programs strengthen students' marketability and can vastly improve their career prospects at graduation.

During business and engineering co-ops, medicine and technology practicums and fine arts placements, students engaged in experiential learning programs are setting the foundation for fulfilling, prosperous careers. There are of course students who take these programs and realize the career to which they're aspiring is not the right fit. Either way, these are empowering experiences that reveal a great deal about one's prefer-

ences, potential, the possibilities that lie ahead, and the opportunity to switch gears if something doesn't feel right. Work-terms can also serve to enrich students' lives through experiences in international development or community service.

Applied learning can be enormously beneficial for employers. Not only do they get the chance to review talent over a brief period without making a long-term commitment, they tap into the new ideas and highly valued critical thinking, problem-solving and analytical skills that these students possess.

A 2014 survey by the Canadian Council of Chief Executives found that when executives of 100 of Canada's largest companies were asked which qualities matter most in potential employees, they responded with "people skills" as number one, followed by communications skills, problem-solving skills, analytical abilities and leadership. When considering new hires, these executives are most interested in strong soft skills, which universities are known for cultivating. In experiential learning programs, students learn to apply these skills to future careers. In sixth place in the survey was industry-specific knowledge and experience, which further supports applied learning as a highly valuable pursuit in terms of students' employment prospects after graduation.

When it comes time to find employment, graduates who have relevant work experience are ahead of their peers. The most recent National Graduates Survey released by Statistics Canada shows that bachelor's level graduates with co-op experience earn more than their peers, have higher employment and full-time employment rates, and are more likely to report that their debt was paid off two years after graduation.

This report provides a snapshot of the breadth of experiential learning opportunities offered by Ontario's universities and places a spotlight on students and employers who are benefitting from them.