Bridging the Soft-Skills Gap between Canadian Post-Secondary Education and Employment through Work-Integrated Learning: A Case Study on Arts Students

by

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A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfilment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Sociology

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2023

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

Problem Statement:

Post-secondary institutions in Canada are currently under the microscope as the unemployment rate among new graduates continue to rise. Employers have critiqued universities and colleges for inadequately training graduates for the labour market, emphasizing the lack of transferable soft-skills (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). In line with this critique, sociologists have suggested that work-integrated learning (WIL) programs such as co-operative education, internship, apprenticeship, clinical placements, or other practice-based curricula can be a powerful tool to reverse the rising trends in unemployment rate by helping students develop soft-skills, gain relevant work experience, and apply classroom knowledge in real-world situations (Martin & Rouleau, 2020). Researchers have also highlighted that although WIL programs can be an effective pedagogical approach in all fields of study, there is a heightened importance for Arts students to participate in WIL (Li, 2016), as this specific group tends to encounter greater barriers in terms of finding employment during academic years (Yamamoto, 2014) as well as after graduation upon entry into the workforce (Zeid et al., 2015).

Research Purpose, Question, and Methodology:

Despite the importance of WIL, there is a lack of Canadian qualitative research that documents the perspectives of Arts students in Ontario regarding WIL programs. This topic is a matter of urgency and high relevance as Arts graduates with BA degree are often under-or-unemployed post-graduation (Zeid et al., 2015), compared to those who possess a Master, Ph.D., or higher degree equivalent (Council of Ontario's Universities, 2022), particularly in Ontario which has one of the highest unemployment rates among graduates. To bridge this critical gap in contemporary sociological literature on WIL, I have conducted a qualitative case study entailing 50 semi-structured interviews of Arts students from world's largest work-integrated learning institution—the University of Waterloo, which serves as a strong exemplar of WIL as a successful education model on both national and global levels (University of Waterloo, 2023b). Using NVivo software data analysis techniques, I have answered four research questions which involved investigating the perceptions of WIL among Arts students, the key benefits and transferable soft-skills gained through WIL in Arts programs, the common challenges associated with WIL in Arts disciplines, and the WIL-related policies/practices that Arts students recommend to post-secondary institutions.

Main Findings:

Grounding this project on human capital theory, situated learning theory, and credentialism, the key findings reveal that when the value of WIL experience for Arts versus non-Arts programs are compared, students who are pursuing non-conventional Arts majors such as Accounting, Finance, and Economics consider the relevance of WIL to be same or similar for all fields, whereas students from traditional Arts programs such as Sociology, Psychology, and History predict that WIL experience can be a higher economic investment and a larger evidence of competencies for Arts degree-holders as they are more likely to experience greater difficulties in the job market due to Arts professions being stigmatized. Furthermore, the non co-op students voiced their concerns regarding insufficient exposure and awareness of WIL in post-secondary institutions which resulted in their lack of participation, whereas the co-op students expressed that there are limited field-specific WIL placements and low departmental/faculty support which made their process of seeking and securing co-op positions challenging. Both groups of students perceive that there is a shortage of WIL opportunities within the Faculty of Arts, and thus, they emphasized on the increasing need to make WIL accessible for all Arts students which can contribute towards their human capital growth, graduate employability, and ultimately improve their school-to-work transition while bridging the soft-skills gap between post-secondary education and employment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful for all the people in my personal and professional life who have supported me on this academic journey of completing my thesis as part of the Master of Arts (MA) requirement at the University of Waterloo (UW). To begin, I would like to thank my mom (Monika), dad (Jaheer), best friends (Kruba, Zain, Anita, Rishan, and Sara), and a supportive brotherly figure (Kresanth) for helping me overcome the external challenges that occurred during this journey. Their constant support and encouragement throughout this research project have helped me achieve this milestone.

Second, I would like to thank my research supervisor, Dr. Janice Aurini who is an Associate Professor at UW. Dr. Aurini shares my passion for Sociology of Education (SOE) and considers this area of research an incredibly relevant domain in the contemporary landscape of sociological literature. As a leading scholar and a highly accomplished sociologist in SOE, Dr. Aurini's extensive knowledge and academic guidance helped me to succeed in this research project. Aside from Dr. Aurini's intellectual capacities, she is also a humanistic supervisor who is committed to students' welfare and promotes an inclusive atmosphere. She demonstrated compassion, empathy, and understanding during the difficult times of this project. In her, I have found my idol.

Third, I would like to thank Dr. Owen Gallupe, who is the internal faculty member of this thesis project. As an established Associate Professor and the Associate Chair of the Sociology and Legal Studies department at UW, Dr. Gallupe has been an inspirational figure to all the graduate students including myself. His teaching proficiencies, methodological fluency, and research expertise made a significant impact in my professional career. Dr. Gallupe's continuous support and faith in my academic ability also motivated me to produce high quality work in the MA program. In particular, Dr. Gallupe's sociological insights and thorough feedback on this project were instrumental. Without Dr. Gallupe's contributions to my academic journey, I would not be where I am today.

I am extremely appreciative of Dr. Allison Chenier's professional advice throughout my MA program and for her support in this thesis project. Along with being a member of my MA supervisory committee, Dr. Chenier is a remarkable example of defining optimism, determination, and perseverance in academia. A very special thank you to my graduate mentor and academic role-model, Emerson LaCroix—an exceptionally talented PhD candidate at UW and someone I am proud to call a great friend. It was his consistent mentorship that helped me enhance my research techniques, writing competencies, and presentation skills. I am also thankful for my close friends at UW, Maria Brisbane and Sana Shah, graduate peers, and faculty members for creating a productive learning environment at the University of Waterloo. The Sociology Graduate Coordinator at UW, Quinn Smith is another noteworthy individual who has provided tremendous support throughout my MA program which I am thankful for. Most importantly, I am eternally grateful to my research participants for their intellectual contributions towards this project. Without them, this study would not be possible.

DEDICATION

Dr. Andrew D. Nevin & Dr. Christian Caron

The first person that I would like to dedicate this thesis to is my undergraduate mentor, Dr. Andrew D. Nevin, who is currently an Assistant Professor in Sociology at the University of Massachusetts Boston. At a young age, Andrew become one of the most accomplished Sociologists for his extensive research contributions. When I first met Andrew, he was a PhD student and a Teaching Assistant at the University of Toronto for some of the Sociology courses that I took during my undergraduate studies. Shortly after, Andrew became an instructor for a 4th-year seminar course which also happens to be my last undergraduate course at the University of Toronto. Throughout the academic years, Andrew has consistently supported me and motivated me to produce high quality work. Anytime I doubted myself, Andrew would tell me, "Mrittika, you got this! Keep going!" – These are the same words that I would repeat to myself whenever I ran into any obstacle during this MA journey. Andrew was also the first person who encouraged me to join the Sociology and Legal Studies department at the University of Waterloo due to the precise alignment of my thesis topic with Dr. Janice Aurini's research area. If it was not for him, I would not have the courage to commute to a different city and attend graduate school in Waterloo. Andrew always led by example and taught me that life begins at the end of your comfort zone when you dare to be different and challenge yourself to meet your highest potential.

The second individual that I would like to dedicate my thesis to is Dr. Christian Caron who is currently an Associate Professor and Associate Undergraduate Chair in Sociology at the University of Toronto. Dr. Caron's SOC101 was the first Sociology course that I took as an elective in my post-secondary education which not only made me acknowledge the value of sociological knowledge, but also made me realize that Sociology is the field that I would like to pursue as a career. That particular moment of epiphany occurred after attending Dr. Caron's lecture on *'Research Methods.'* At the end of that lecture, I remember waiting in a long line of students inside the Con Hall at the University of Toronto to speak to Dr. Caron. When it was finally my turn, I said to Dr. Caron, "I don't have a course content related question today, but I would like to hear your thoughts on an academic decision that I am planning to take." Dr. Caron happily agreed to offer advice on this matter.

Afterward, I explained my situation in detail by stating that "Dr. Caron, I am someone who taught Math and Science in various tutoring centers and after-school programs from the age of 16. I even attended the enriched *MaST* program in high-school which specializes in Mathematics, Science and Technology. I am also currently enrolled in several Math, Statistics, and Economic courses. However, after learning from your lecture that I can combine mathematical applications, statistical analysis, coding, and economic theories to a Sociological area that I am interested in researching, I am considering switching to the Sociology program, but the decision has not been confirmed yet." He asked why and I replied that "after I spoke to my close ones, none of them showed enthusiasm about this decision due to the unfavourable stereotypes attached to Arts disciplines. That's why I would like to take advice from you since you're an experienced Sociologist. Do you recommend that I switch to an Arts field after being a STEM student all my life?" Dr. Caron answered, "Although I can't make a decision for any student, I always encourage them to pursue what they are passionate about if they are willing to persevere." He further added "If you truly want to succeed in any field including Sociology, you must be determined to go through the potential challenges to achieve the success that you desire." After that conversation with Dr. Caron, I felt a sense of confidence to make the unconventional choice of switching from a STEM discipline to an Arts program. Fast forward to 2023, I am starting my PhD in Sociology at the University of Waterloo with Provost Doctoral Entrance Award. As Dr. Caron stated that day, any goal is attainable if you have the determination.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Post-secondary institutions in Ontario are currently on the radar of researchers, policymakers, and employers as the unemployment rate among new graduates is increasing and the value of higher education system is being re-evaluated by these stakeholders. Despite acquiring post-secondary degree or diploma, many graduates in Canada are struggling to find employment in their field of study and are engaging in low-income jobs to afford their living costs, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic era which further contributed to the long existing unemployment rate (Csernyik, 2022; McCalla, 2022). While this has resulted in a nationwide concern across Canada, some of the provinces are enduring greater stress such as Ontario which has one of the highest unemployment rates (Statistics Canada, 2023). Due to this, employers have critiqued post-secondary institutions for inadequately preparing graduates for the labour market, emphasizing the lack of transferable soft skills (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). Similarly, sociologists, economists, and business analysts have also identified an increasing soft-skills gap between higher education and employment (BHER, 2015; Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020; Hurrell, 2016; RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016; Washor, 2015).

Considering the soft-skills gap, researchers have suggested that work-integrated learning (WIL) such as co-operative education, internships, apprenticeships, field work, clinical placements, or other hands-on programs can rectify the rising unemployment rate among graduates by helping students to develop transferable soft skills, gain relevant work experience, and apply classroom knowledge in practice-based settings (Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020; Martin & Rouleau, 2020). Although work-integrated learning programs

can be beneficial in all fields of study, there is a heightened importance for Arts students to participate in WIL programs (Li, 2016), as they experience greater challenges in terms of finding a job in their field of study during their schooling years (Yamamoto, 2014) as well as after entering the workforce post-graduation (Zeid et al., 2015).

Despite the prevalence of a soft-skills gap between higher education and employment across Canada, there is a lack of qualitative research on the perspectives of Arts students regarding the role of work-integrated learning programs on potential labour market outcomes, resulting in a critical gap in contemporary Canadian sociological literature. This topic requires deeper attention and greater understanding from researchers who can present specific policy recommendations from the viewpoints of Arts students that can help them overcome the challenge of securing employment in their field of study. To achieve this research objective, I have conducted a qualitative case study involving 50 semi-structured interviews of Faculty of Arts students from world's largest and Canada's oldest work-integrated learning institution, the University of Waterloo (Co-operative Education Manual, 2015). Through this case study, I have answered the following research question: *How do Faculty of Arts students perceive the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and labour market outcomes post-graduation?* To address this research question in depth, I have discussed the benefits and challenges of WIL programs that Arts students tend to encounter, the soft-skills that Arts students have developed or expect to develop through WIL programs that they can transfer to the job market, and the WIL-related policies and practices that Arts students recommend to post-secondary institutions for the enhancement of graduates' school-to-work transitions.

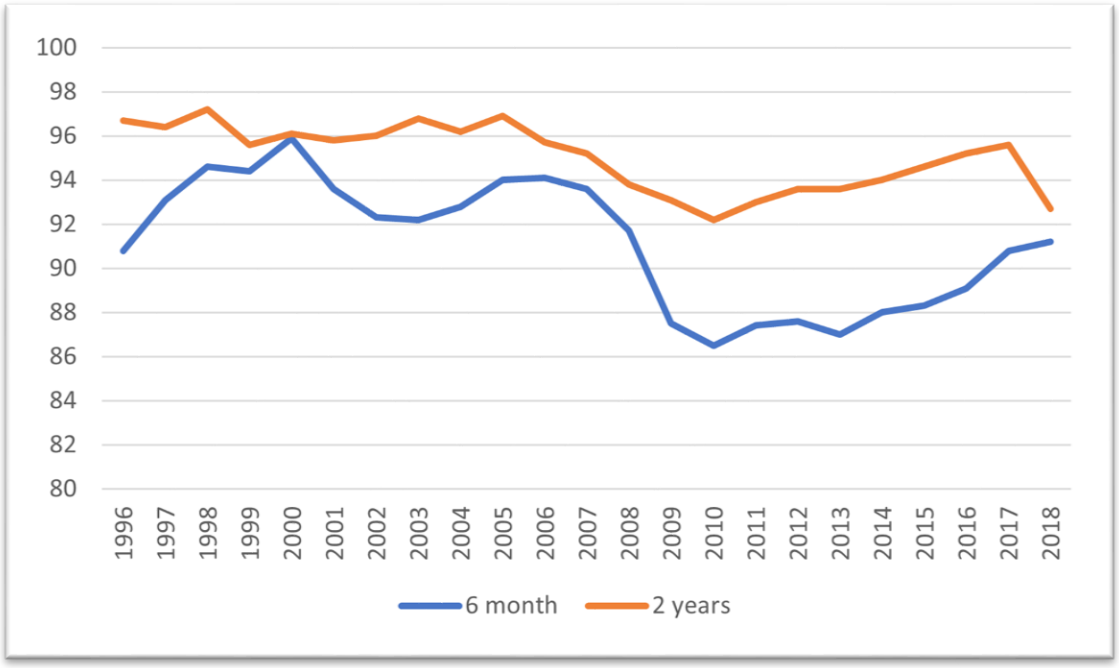
1.1 Statement of the Problem

As the unemployment rate among new graduates continue to rise, the transferability of knowledge and skills gained through post-secondary education in Canada is being re-examined by employers, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders. While this has generated an alarm nationwide, Ontario's graduates have consistently had higher unemployment rates compared to many other provinces. Over the past two decades from 2000 to 2020, the unemployment rate in Ontario among post-secondary certificate and diploma holders increased from 4.3 to 7.9 percent and the rate for university degree holders climbed up from 3.9 to 7.5 percent (Statistics Canada, 2023). Within the population of Ontario university degree holders, graduates with a bachelor's degree are finding it more challenging to secure employment in their field of study in comparison to those who carries a Master, Ph.D., or higher than a bachelor's degree (Council of Ontario's Universities, 2022). Importantly, research analysts have warned us that existing trends are not simply a by-product of the COVID-19 pandemic; rather unemployment rate among new graduates depicts a problematic social reality that has been growing over the years (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The Council of Ontario Universities has recently published comparative trends from 1996 to 2018 on the percentage of Ontario graduates employed within 6 months and 2 years of graduation (Usher, 2022). As shown below in Figure 1, the percentage of Ontario graduates who were employed within 6 months was approximately 91% in 1996. More than two decades later in 2018, the employment rate has not improved despite the educational expansions, scientific innovations, and technological advancements. Similarly, the percentage of Ontario graduates who were employed within 2 years of graduation in 1996

was approximately 97%, however, it decreased to 93% by 2018. This lack of improvement in the employment rate in Ontario has been visually represented in the graph below (Usher, 2022), reinforcing the problem of how a growing number of under-or-unemployed graduates are struggling in the current labour market (Csernyik, 2022; McCalla, 2022).

Figure 1: Percentage of Ontario Graduates Employed, 6 Months and 2 Years Post-Graduation, 1996-2018



Usher, A. (2022). New Graduates Outcomes Data. *Higher Education Strategy Associates*. Retrieved from https://higheredstrategy.com/new-graduate-outcomes-data/

Considering the growing patterns of unemployment rate among new graduates, researchers speculate that the trends signal a detachment between how post-secondary institutions are preparing students at the undergraduate level and what employers are seeking from new graduates (Malik & Venkatraman, 2017; Sarin, 2019; Washor, 2015). In the contemporary era, employers have "blamed and criticized" higher education for not training students effectively for the current labour market demands, emphasizing on graduates' lack of transferable soft-skills (Succi &

Wieandt, 2019, p. 115). Unlike hard-skills which are technical competencies, soft skills refer to a wide range of personality traits, characteristics, and interpersonal qualities that augment a worker's ability to complete a task (Patacsil & Tablatin, 2017). Dean and East (2019) reveal that the historical focus on hard-skills alone is "no longer sufficient" for employers in today's dynamic labour force. The 21st century employers now place an "heightened importance" on soft skills as a result of the competitive battleground in which businesses are rapidly evolving and shifting their labour market perspectives (Dean & East, 2019, p. 17). Without adequate transferable soft skills, employers are reluctant to hire new graduates and comfortably rely on them for job duties that can impact the productivity level of their companies (RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016).

On the contrary, some of the post-secondary institutions have directed the "blame game" of graduates' lack of employability at the individual, family, or government (Hurrell, 2016, p. 69), primarily the first two groups (Abdelwahab, 2020; Peterson et al., 2011; Tyner & Petrilli, 2018). An institutional news report published by Wittenborg University is questioning students: "Do you have what it takes to be a good student? Do you blame your teacher or the books if you don't get good grades? If your answer to the second question is a *yes*, then the answer to the first question is a *no*" (Abdelwahab, 2020). Other educational institutions are far more subtle in terms of transferring the accountability, however, they do not shy away from associating academic success primarily with factors linked to students and parents (Peterson et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2004; Tyner & Petrilli, 2018).

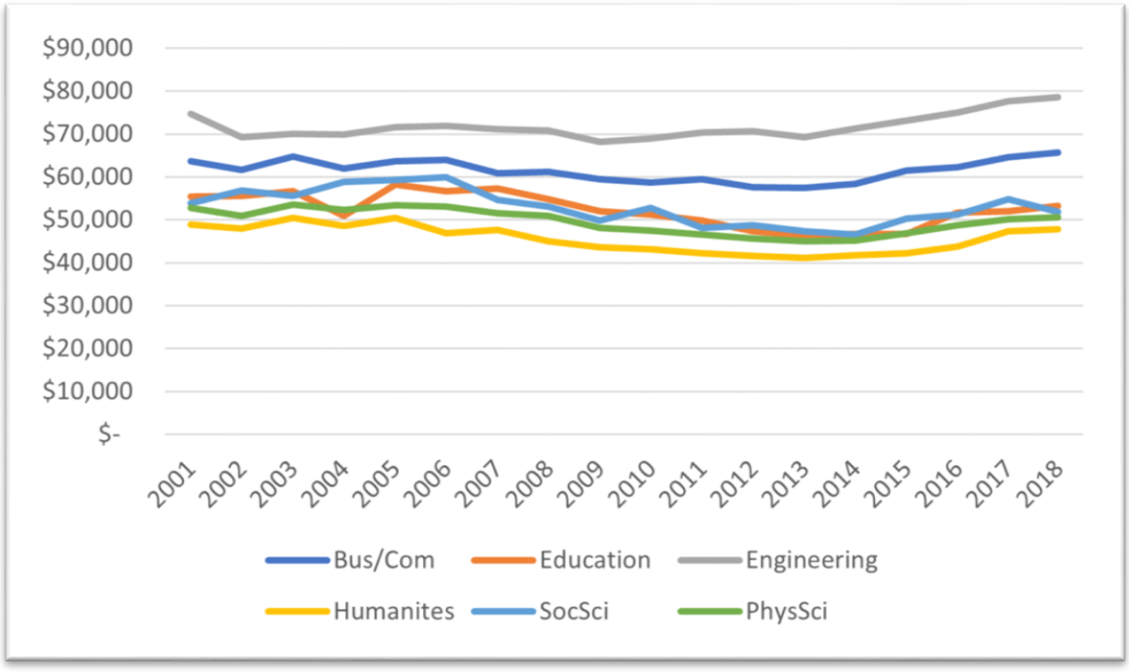
Considering the perspectives of employers and post-secondary institutions, many researchers have suggested that work-integrated learning (WIL) programs can potentially be an effective approach to tackle the rising unemployment rate among new graduates (Jackson &

Wilton, 2016; Li, 2016; Martin & Rouleau, 2020). WIL programs are theorized to provide students with an opportunity to apply academic content to practice-based tasks in the real-world. By combining traditional post-secondary education with contemporary work experience, WIL is seen to aid in the preparation of graduates' entry into the labour market and help them navigate the complexities of modern workforce, resulting in a smoother transition from higher education to employment (Jackson & Collings, 2018; Jackson, 2013).

In Canada, there are 436 post-secondary institutions consisting of public and private universities, colleges, and other higher education organizations (Council of Ministers of Education, 2022), however, only 84 of them, or 19.26%, offer WIL, primarily in the form of co-op (Tamburri, 2014). In the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, WIL is viewed as an essential component of the curriculum in which students are matched with prospective employers in their fields (Martin & Rouleau, 2020). In comparison, Arts programs do not advertise WIL as a fundamental aspect of post-secondary education which contributes to a lower level of participation in WIL programs among Arts students (Li, 2016). This is highly problematic because compared to other fields of study, researchers have discovered that Arts graduates with a BA degree tend to experience a severe "mal-employment" challenge, meaning that they are either under-or unemployed which limits their ability to demonstrate their full work potential (Zeid et al., 2015, p. 1). On top of the existing student competition in Canadian higher education (Davies & Hammack, 2005) and the negative school-to-work transitional impact on student's mental health due to professional uncertainty and lack of coping (Geirdal, Nerdrum & Bonsaksen, 2019), the labour market struggles among graduates in less advantageous fields (e.g., Arts disciplines) increases the employment barriers and makes it more difficult than ever to thrive in the current economy (Zeid et al., 2015).

The differences in labour market success can be further illustrated by the following graph which presents data from a survey conducted by the Council of Ontario Universities (2022) on the average annual salaries of Ontario graduates by field of study. As shown in Figure 2, the salaries are relatively high for engineering and business/commerce graduates, whereas humanities and social sciences degree-holders are among the lowest groups of earners. These findings reinforce the "mal-employment" challenge among Arts graduates who typically face a greater number of hurdles upon entry into the job market when attempting to find work that corresponds with their academic discipline. As a result of added transitional barriers, Arts students have a harder time coping financially, especially in terms of paying back their accumulated student debts from post-secondary education (Zeid et al., 2015).

Figure 2: Average Annual Salaries of Ontario Graduates by Field of Study, 6 Months and 2 Years After Graduation by Graduating Class, 2001-2018



Usher, A. (2022). New Graduates Outcomes Data. *Higher Education Strategy Associates*. Retrieved from https://higheredstrategy.com/new-graduate-outcomes-data/

1.2 Purpose and Significance of Research

Between Ontario post-secondary institutions and employers, there is no agreement in terms of who is accountable for graduate employability and what can be done to improve the transitional processes from education to employment which is why this topic requires further investigation. This topic is also a matter of urgency and high relevance as the soft-skills gap between higher education and employment is widening over the years (Washor, 2015), and the unemployment rate among new graduates continues to increase (Statistics Canada, 2023). Considering this issue, many sociologists and contemporary researchers have suggested that work-integrated learning (WIL) programs can potentially reverse this growing trend of unemployment rate within the graduate population. Their suggestion is based on the assertion that WIL can assist post-secondary students to develop the transferable soft-skills that employers demand in the 21st century, resulting in a lower gap between higher education and employment (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Li, 2016; Martin & Rouleau, 2020).

Within this realm of scientific discussions concerning work-integrated learning programs, the perspectives of employers and post-secondary institutions are widely documented, especially the viewpoints of the former group. This is because once graduates complete the school-to-work transition, educators are no longer in regular contact with them. Many people metaphorically refer to this post-graduation reality as "out of sight, out of mind" concept (Cushing, 2012). During this phase when graduates navigate the job market, employers begin to play an active role in graduates' daily life, and thus, the employers' perspectives are more prominent in WIL literature on graduate employability. Nonetheless, it is critically important to note that students' perspectives of WIL programs are rarely heard and examined, contributing to a substantial void in current literature which my thesis project intends to fulfill.

Another important factor to note is that the majority of sociological literature on work-integrated learning programs are quantitative in nature and draws conclusions primarily from statistical findings such as studies by Galarneau, Kinack, and Marshall (2020), Martin and Rouleau (2020), and Washor (2015). These studies serve the purpose of broadly presenting the correlation between WIL programs and labour market outcomes without focusing on the specific nuances of WIL and to what extent it can bridge the soft-skills gap between higher education and employment. Most importantly, these studies along with the other quantitative research on WIL do not precisely investigate the perspectives of students from different fields of study in Canadian post-secondary institutions. In particular, the perspectives of Ontario Arts undergraduates regarding WIL programs and their implications on labour market outcomes have not been explored in-depth in contemporary sociological literature. It is critically important to use a qualitative research approach to focus on this particular group of post-secondary students for the following three purposes:

i) The unemployment rate among new graduates in Ontario is one of the highest compared to other Canadian provinces (Statistics Canada, 2023). For this reason, focusing on Ontario graduates is appropriate as the study can offer insights for potential policy recommendations to reduce the soft-skills gap between higher education and employment in Ontario.

ii) There is a lack of exposure and awareness of WIL programs in the Faculty of Arts in comparison to all other programs (Li, 2016), and the challenge of finding a job is greater for Arts graduates than those who are from non-Arts fields such as STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) (Yamamoto, 2014; Zeid et al., 2015), and thus, focusing on Arts students is vital.

iii) The unemployment rate is highest among BA degree holders compared to other post-secondary degree holders such as Master, PhD, or higher degree equivalent

(Statistics Canada, 2023), which is why focusing on students who are in their 4th-year of pursuing a BA degree and who intend to enter the labour market post-graduation is most relevant. This is because they are going to experience the school-to-work transition sooner than 1st, 2nd, or 3rd-year undergraduates.

Reflecting on the above three concerning factors, the viewpoints of Ontario Arts undergraduates who intend to enter the job market post-graduation can be beneficial to bridge a critical gap in the current landscape of work-integrated learning literature. Given the need for an in-depth understanding of Arts students' perceptions of WIL programs, a case study of an Ontario institution that fosters an academic environment with work-integrated learning programs is ideal for this research project. For this reason, the University of Waterloo has been strategically chosen as it is the world's largest post-secondary institution to offer WIL programs since 1957, primarily in the form of co-operative education (co-op) in which students alternate between work and study terms throughout their schooling years. It is also one of the first institutions to recognize the value of work-integrated learning programs for all fields of study and offer co-op programs to Arts students starting from 1975 (University of Waterloo, 2023a)[1]. In addition, it is important to note that given the scope and duration of a standard thesis in the Master of Arts program, it is not feasible to conduct a research project of this nature with multiple case studies involving a large number of Ontario insitutions.[2] Therefore, it is appropriate to choose the University of Waterloo as a vehicle to examine how WIL programs can contribute towards bridging the soft-skills gap between higher education and employment, from the perspectives of Arts students.

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[1]Further explanation for choosing the University of Waterloo can be found under the methodology section, 4.3: *Research Design.*

[2]More information on the feasibility of this project can be found in section 10.2: *Project Limitations.*

1.3 Research Questions

In this case study, to explore the perspectives of Arts students in regard to the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and its implications on labour market outcomes post-graduation, the following research questions will be answered:

Main Research Question:

Theme 1: Perceptions of WIL

RQ 1) *How do Faculty of Arts students perceive the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and labour market outcomes post-graduation?*

Sub-Research Questions:

Theme 2: Benefits of WIL

RQ 2a: *According to Arts students, what are the key benefits of participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education?*

RQ 2b: *What are the transferable soft skills that Arts students have developed and/or expect to develop through work-integrated learning programs to better prepare themselves for the labour market?*

Theme 3: Challenges of WIL

RQ 3: *According to Arts students, what are the common challenges associated with participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education?*

Theme 4: Policies/Practices in WIL

RQ 4: *Which WIL policies or practices do Arts students recommend for post-secondary institutions that can potentially improve their school-to-work transitions?*

1.4 Research Objectives

There are three dominating theories in sociological literature on the topic of work-integrated learning which are: *Human Capital Theory, Credentialism,* and *Situated Learning Theory* (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Walters, 2004). Drawing on these theories, I will answer the above research questions to achieve the following objectives of this research project:

i) Critically explore the perspectives of Arts students to understand their viewpoints of the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and potential labour market outcomes post-graduation.

ii) Discover the key benefits and challenges regarding work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education that Faculty of Arts students tend to encounter.

iii) Identify the transferable soft-skills that Arts students have developed and/or expect to develop through work-integrated learning programs to better prepare themselves for the labour market post-graduation.

iv) Act as a lending voice for Arts students to present their recommendations of institutional policies and/or practices that they consider effective in terms of bridging the soft-skills gap between post-secondary education and employment through work-integrated learning programs.

v) Make noteworthy contributions to contemporary sociological literature by explaining the nuances of work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education and to what extent WIL plays a role in school-to-work transitions. By doing this, specific WIL program-related changes can be presented from the viewpoints of Arts students that are particularly designed to facilitate their development of transferable soft-skills and to elevate their transitional experience of moving from school to work environments.

CHAPTER 1:
SUMMARY OF INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the following: the research topic of this thesis project, statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of this study, the research questions of inquiry, and the research objectives. In this chapter, readers were informed about the growing soft-skills gap between higher education and employment, which employers claim is contributing to the unemployment rate among new graduates, and they critique post-secondary institutions for not preparing students adequately for the labour market (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). Considering the need for graduates to develop transferable soft-skills to be "workplace ready," many quantitative researchers have investigated this topic and identified a positive correlation between WIL programs and labour market success post-graduation (Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020; Martin & Rouleau, 2020; Washor, 2015), however, there is a lack of Canadian qualitative research on this matter, especially involving Arts students who struggle the most in terms of finding a job in their field of study during their academic years (Yamamoto, 2014) as well as after graduation upon entry into the workforce (Zeid et al., 2015). Thus, it is important to understand Arts students' viewpoints regarding the role of WIL programs on school-to-work transitions and the implications of WIL on potential labour market outcomes. This can enable researchers to present specific policy recommendations catered to Arts students that can help them overcome the challenge of securing employment in their field of study. To achieve this research goal and to fill in this critical gap in contemporary Canadian sociological literature, I have conducted a qualitative case study involving Faculty of Arts students from world's largest and Canada's oldest work-integrated learning institution, the University of Waterloo which serves as a strong exemplar of WIL programs as a successful educational model (Co-operative Education Manual, 2015).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 "The Blame Game": Academic Accountability and Graduate Employability

In the 21st century, one of the most controversial debates in contemporary sociological literature on graduate employability is whether post-secondary institutions are preparing students adequately for the job market (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). On one hand, employers have "blamed and criticized" higher education for not training students appropriately to navigate the workforce, highlighting the lack of transferable skills (Succi & Wieandt, 2019, p. 115). On the other hand, many post-secondary institutions have directed the "blame game" at the individual, family, or government (Hurrell, 2016, p. 69). More precisely, post-secondary institutions have associated academic success primarily with attributes linked to students and parents instead of institutional or curriculum-related factors (Gail et al., 2004; Strauss, 2012; Tyner & Petrilli, 2018). In line with this premise, sociologists and researchers have identified that some of the common individual-level attributes that are connected to one's academic success includes parenting techniques, parental education attainment, and socio-economic disparities as these factors have been empirically proven to influence children's educational achievement and life outcomes in adulthoods (Aurini & Hillier, 2018; Lareau, 2011). In addition, summer learning researchers and social reproduction theorists have found that individual-level factors such as learning opportunities in non-school environments also contribute to academic success because students tend to lose their numeracy and literacy skills when they are away from school. These scholars have stated that since schools are known to "equalize access to resources" (e.g., strategically designed lesson plans by professional educators, academic supplies, and supportive peers), the time spent outside of school settings expose children to greater differences of learning opportunities (Davies, Aurini, & Hillier,

2022, p. 1057). Consequently, this leads to a wider expansion of achievement gap between affluent children who can afford to attend summer programs compared to those who are from low-income household and cannot enroll in extra-curricular activities outside the regular academic year (Davies et al., 2015). Similarly, other scholars have discussed academic success in conjunction with micro-level factors based on theoretical concepts that have been historically linked to one's learning ability and career outcomes (Bertolini et al., 2012; Mayor & Suarez, 2019; Owens, Shippee & Hensel, 2008), ultimately associating the responsibility of knowledge and skills acquisition with individual-level elements of students instead of institutional or curriculum-related factors.

In the field of Sociology of higher education, Cote and Allahar's (2007) book, *Ivory Tower Blues: A University of System in Crisis*, takes a middle position in the blame game of academic accountability and graduate employability. The authors reveal that there is a lack of involvement, which they refer to as academic disengagement among students and faculty in regard to the expectations of teaching and learning, triggering the gap between higher education and labour market to expand over time (Steele, 2007). Cote and Allahar (2007) further argue that there are several crises at interplay in contemporary post-secondary education. On one hand, the majority of millennial students have a sense of entitlement as they expect to navigate through post-secondary education using the same strategies as high-school. For instance, if instructors hold high academic standards, entitled students are more inclined to reflect their dissatisfaction through poor teaching evaluation scores. On the other hand, instructors who put little effort in teaching have fewer expectations from students— "the disengaged are thus leading the disengaged" (Metcalfe, 2008, p. 518). Some of the factors that allow this disengagement to thrive in academic settings is credentialism and mass production of graduates who pursue post-secondary education to obtain a degree rather than to have an intellectual experience (Winchester, 2009). Furthermore, Cote and

Allahar (2007) state that "the sheer number of students now coming to Canadian universities puts pressure on the system, threatening to reduce its legitimacy as a site of true higher education" (Cote & Allahar, 2007, p. 28). The pressure to accept unprepared students has resulted in "meaningless grading scale" (Metcalfe, 2008, p. 519). From a holistic viewpoint, Cote and Allahar (2007) describes it as an unspoken arrangement in which students pretend to learn while instructors pretend to teach. The authors further reveal that as long as enrollment rates are not below the desired threshold, post-secondary institutions can continue to flourish in this gray area of crisis (Wente, 2009). Not only Cote and Allahar, but other authors have also written books on the legitimacy of Canadian post-secondary education and the value earned from a university degree. For instance, *Nothing Less Than Great: Reforming Canadian Universities* by Weingarten (2021) discusses the extent to which universities claim their ability to train students for the workforce and whether those claims are an accurate reflection of the quality of education received by students (LaCroix, 2022b). The increasing number of books and articles on the teaching mechanisms of post-secondary institutions further depicts the growing concern among authors, researchers, economists, policymakers, and other stakeholders regarding the mismatch between the way post-secondary institutions are preparing students versus what employers are seeking from new graduates.

Despite the rise in publications on the value of post-secondary education, there is no consensus regarding what can be done to improve graduate employability. In fact, the "blame game" concerning the responsibility of graduate employability is not a novel matter; it has been going on over the past few decades between employers and post-secondary institutions. As a result of this controversial debate between these two groups, researchers have attempted to investigate the key questions: "Whose responsibility is it to develop soft skills?" "Should graduates, higher

education, or companies fill the gap?" (Succi & Wieandt, 2019, p. 115). While some researchers have presented findings in the favour of employers (Archer & Davison, 2008; Clarke, 2017; Washor, 2015), other researchers have advocated the perspectives of post-secondary institutions (Fauth et al, 2019). From a complete overview of sociological literature regarding academic accountability and graduate employability, employers' perspective of holding post-secondary institutions responsible is more widely documented than any other viewpoint. Among all stakeholders, the perspective of students on this topic is excessively lacking, resulting in a substantial gap in sociology of higher education which this research project intends to bridge.

2.2 "Workplace Ready:" The Soft-Skills Gap between Education and Employment

Despite the continuous blame game and lack of consensus in accountability of graduate employability, employers and post-secondary institutions agree that there is a growing demand for graduates to be "workplace ready" prior to entering the job market (Washor, 2015, p. 5). Although this demand is not new as employers have been interested in the type of individual they hire since the 1970's (Beynon, 1975), this requirement is increasing due to the heightened competition between potential candidates in the 21st century job markets (Stewart et al., 2016). As a result of the rapidly evolving competition, employers have become more selective in their hiring decisions and prefer graduates who are "workplace ready." Prior to the rise of globalization, industrialization, and urbanization, being "workplace ready" meant having hard-skills which are technical in nature. In the modern era, for graduates to be "workplace ready" and to have an advantage in the labour market, they should possess a combination of hard and soft-skills (Washor, 2015). Soft-skills refer to personality traits, characteristics, and interpersonal qualities that help individuals succeed in the workforce such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, negotiating capacity, analytical ability, leadership attributes, and teamwork skills to name a few.

Patacsil and Tablatin (2017) asserts that unlike hard-skills which is an individual's ability to perform a specialized technical task, soft-skills are easily transferable and can be applied across various types of occupational positions which is why they are highly valued. This is also supported by LinkedIn's 2019 Global Talent Trends report (see Figure 3 below) which found that 89% of talent acquisition managers stated that when new hires are not able to perform the job adequately, it is primarily due to the lack of soft skills.

Figure 3: LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends 2019 Report

As shown in Figure 3, the majority of surveyed employers in LinkedIn's 2019 report mentioned that soft-skills are in demand among employers as they are necessary for company success. The findings also indicate that many employers consider soft skills to be equally or more important than hard-skills such as technical knowledge (George, 2019). This is because soft-skills are required to conduct basic tasks in a professional environment such as interacting with others, working in a team, and following the workplace rules. Soft skills also help individuals to overcome job-related challenges and handle unexpected complexities, and thus, employers seek these skills

[1] LinkedIn Talent Solutions. (2019). Global Talent Trends 2019. Retrieved from https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/talent-solutions/resources/pdfs/global-talent-trends-2019.pdf

from new graduates when making hiring decisions (Patacsil & Tablatin, 2017; Washor, 2015). Since soft skills hold high relevance in most jobs, employers often categorize those who lack soft skills as "bad hires" as displayed above in Figure 3 in the 2019 LinkedIn Global Talent Trends report (George, 2019). Like any "bad hires," graduates who have a considerable deficiency in soft-skills may struggle to communicate effectively with colleagues, work cooperatively on projects, or adapt to the dynamic changes in the contemporary job market (Washor, 2015). Lacking soft-skills may also result in difficulty managing time, meeting deadlines, and completing tasks as per company's expectations and standard (LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 2019; Rockwood, 2021). Soft-skills are particularly beneficial to possess as they are less tangible compared to hard-skills, making it tough for employers to teach them in a short period of time (Rockwood, 2021). For this reason, employers expect post-secondary institutions to train students to acquire the required soft-skills over the years so that students can easily navigate the labour market adversities post-graduation (Nguyen, 2016).

Over the past few decades, research has extensively focused on hard-skills (Balcar, 2016; Eshet, 2004), and there has been a lack of attention allocated to the investigation of transferable soft-skills (Federica, 2018; Seligman, 2002). The *International Employee Barometer* (IEB) survey also stressed the importance of soft-skills in the current labour market and the need to explore them more than before. The IEB survey findings identified that employers ascribed greater value to soft-skills in comparison to graduates' higher education qualifications (Archer & Davison, 2008). Similarly, the *World Economic Forum* (WEF) revealed that 10 out of 16 "crucial proficiencies in the 21st century" are related to workers' soft skills possession (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017, p. 1). Among the transferable soft skills, the top five that recruiters are seeking in recent years are

growth mindset, continuous learning, critical thinking, survival skills, and resilience (Forbes Human Resource Council, 2021). Due to the transferability aspect of soft-skills, these are often synonymized as "employability skills" or "workplace readiness skills" because they are general skills that are necessary for any job regardless of the status of the position, employment duties, or field of work (Opperman, 2016). Since post-secondary institutions play a vital role in the development of soft-skills, employers consistently hold them accountable for a shortage of these skills among new graduates (Nguyen, 2016). Employers further claim that despite the educational advancements, higher education continues to focus more on the hard-skill preparedness, and little attention is given to soft-skills acquisition (Washor, 2015), and thus, analyzing the role of work-integrated learning programs in the development of transferable soft-skills and enhancement of school-to-work transitions is necessary.

2.3 An Overview of Work-Integrated Learning Programs

Although there is no consensus on whether post-secondary institutions are primarily accountable for graduate's lack of transferable skills, there is an understanding among all stakeholders that it is indeed a challenge for higher education to prepare students for the evolving labour markets and meet the demands of the emerging roles in competitive work environments. The rapid changes in the current economy are compelling educators to re-evaluate the ways students are being prepared in post-secondary institutions (Cappelli, 2013; Reich, 2007). One way to rejuvenate the teaching methods, as claimed by Cukier, Hodson, and Omar (2015), is to merge soft-skills developmental procedures with academic courses and technical knowledge. In accordance with this argument, other researchers have suggested that an effective way of helping students to acquire the transferable soft-skills in post-secondary institutions is through work-integrated learning programs such as co-operative (co-op) programs, internships, field placements,

or other forms of hands-on experiences. These programs can potentially contribute towards lowering the unemployment rate among new graduates (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020; Martin & Rouleau, 2020).

From a broad perspective, work-integrated learning (WIL) refers to a form of education that combines academic concepts learned in classroom settings with practical experiences in the real-world. It is a formal partnership that consists of at least one academic institution, a host organization, and a student who participates in the WIL program (Sattler & Peters, 2012). Under this umbrella of work-integrated learning, there are several different types of WIL programs that vary based on their structure, duration, goals, payment, and several other factors (Business Council of Canada, 2015). Despite these variations, the core objective of WIL programs is to better prepare students for the workforce which can reduce their transitional barriers from higher education to employment (Jackson & Wilton, 2016). WIL makes this possible by providing students an opportunity to acquire practical skills, gather work experience in their field of study, increase self-awareness, gain a better understanding of the labour market, as well as build a professional network while receiving an academic credit and often a financial incentive in the form of job payment (Bowen & Drysdale, 2017; Martin & Rouleau, 2020). WIL also provides students with an opportunity to explore different industries and career paths which can help them determine what they are passionate about at an early stage before entering the labour market as a full-time worker. WIL is perceived to be not only a relevant experience but also a rewarding one as it can help students grow professionally and personally (Business Council of Canada, 2015; Jackson & Wilson, 2016; RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016).

In 2012, the *Work-Integrated Learning Employer Survey* was designed to investigate employers' perspectives on the impact of WIL programs on the skills, competencies, and

employment of Ontario graduates. The survey was a partnership between Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HECQO), 14 Ontario post-secondary institutions, the Ministry of Economic Development and Innovation (MEDI), and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). The survey results showed that participation in WIL can help students to easily transition from school to the workforce and provide financial benefits during their schooling years (Sattler and Peters, 2012). About a decade later in 2020, Galarneau and her colleagues conducted a similar research study using 2018 National Graduate Survey (NGS) from Canada and discovered that participating in WIL during post-secondary education is associated with favourable labour market outcomes, up to three years after graduation. This is because WIL programs create new prospects to develop transferable soft-skills that can help students stand out in the labour market as WIL is widely acknowledged by employers. WIL opportunities are also commonly viewed as practical work experience that can be included on students' resume and job application as further evidence of competencies to employers (Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020). A Canadian, quantitative study by Martin & Rouleau (2020) identified that graduates with WIL experience are also more likely to be employed in their field of study, complementing the hard-skills that they have learned in classrooms with the soft-skills that they have acquired through work experience from WIL programs. Along with hard-skills, the soft-skills are frequently sought after by employers when they are making hiring decisions. In addition, Martin & Rouleau (2020) indicated that although relevant experience is highly appreciated by employers, having work experience unrelated to a student's field of study can also have a positive impact on their labour market outcomes post-graduation. This is because work experience—regardless of the field—can be used as evidence of real-world exposure and awareness of the job market which employers value (Martin & Rouleau, 2020).

Despite the positive association of work-integrated learning programs with labour market outcomes, Martin & Rouleau (2020) stated that it is only a well-established educational curriculum in certain fields of study. In the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, work-integrated learning is a critical component of post-secondary education. Through WIL programs, STEM students get matched with prospective employers in their fields which reduces their transitional barriers from school to work. Unlike STEM students, Faculty of Arts graduates tend to face a higher level of challenges during their transitional phase because WIL is not viewed as an integral component of their program (Li, 2016). This may have negative implications because when new graduates enter the labour market without any relevant work experience, employers are often not willing to take the risk of hiring them (Schultz, 2008). As recently as 10 years ago, organizations would hire for potential. However, employers in the current labour market prefer individuals who are equipped to handle the tasks from the start and can "hit the ground running" (Wente, 2018). Hiring inexperienced graduates can also result in investing more time and funds in training facilities, hosting workshops, and preparing newcomers for the company. These investments increase the cost of hiring which discourages employers from being risk-takers when choosing new graduates, especially because there is a limited number of entry-level jobs (RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016).

2.4 The Origin of Work-Integrated Learning in Postsecondary Education

It has been long documented that educational expansion is directly related to higher demands for job skills in the current workforce where the requirements for credentials have climbed due to the high level of competition (Walters, 2004). Not only in public schools, but the private sectors have also magnified in recent years due to the increased competition and demands

of the labour market (Aurini & Davies, 2005). As a result of this educational expansion in both public and private sectors, there has been a growth in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education over the past few decades (Sovilla & Varty, 2011; Washor, 2015). However, the journey of work-integrated learning began much before its value was widely recognized. In 1903 in England, at the University of Sunderland, formerly known as Sunderland Technical College, WIL was first introduced. At its initial phase, WIL was launched in the form of co-op as part of the *British Sandwich Program,* and it was exclusively offered to engineering and architecture students (Co-operative Education Manual, 2005). During its inauguration, WIL did not receive a sufficient amount of attention from academics, employers, or students. In 1906, when an engineer Professor named Herman Schneider from the University of Cincinnati (UC) in Ohia, USA, founded WIL program as co-op (Bjorck, 2021), WIL began to capture more attention.

Professor Schneider implemented co-op programs after realizing how his personal working experiences—clerking at his father's general store, breaking coal at a Pennsylvania mine, and administrating at an architect's office—enhanced his post-secondary education. Similar to the *British Sandwich Program*, Professor Schneider's co-op program was exclusively designed for engineering students when it was first launched (Co-operative Education Manual, 2005; Neihaus, 2018). As part of Schneider's co-op program at the University of Cincinnati (UC), he sent his engineering students to work in factories—a decision that initially encountered heavy skepticism from post-secondary instructors, but he was convinced that integrating theoretical classroom knowledge with practical experience can be beneficial for students (Neihaus, 2018). Many academics strictly opposed Schneider's proposal because they recommended keeping higher education separate from working life, however, local industrialists and business executives appreciated the idea and supported his launch of the co-op program (Sovilla & Varty, 2011). At

that time, the Board of Trustees at UC only approved a one-year trial of Schneider's co-op program and declined to take any accountability if the experiment fails. To academics' disbelief, Schneider's co-op program was extremely successful which he statistically verified through his research using graduates' academic records—those who performed the best in class were the ones who worked while attending university or during summer breaks (Neihaus, 2018). Since then, many consider Schneider as "the father" of work-integrated learning program (WILNZ, 2019).

Since Schneider's implementation of co-op program, work-integrated learning (WIL) has expanded in various forms and transformed into a globally established pedagogical approach in post-secondary institutions to help students apply their learned knowledge in practice-based settings (Bowen & Drysdale, 2017; Neihaus, 2018). Despite this worldwide recognition of WIL programs, the definition of the term "work-integrated learning" remains blurred as different institutions use distinctive language to promote, deliver, and operationalize WIL programs, resulting in a lack of harmony around a single definition. For instance, in the National Graduates Survey (NGS) of Canada, work-integrated learning was originally used to define co-operative placements. From 2018 onwards, NGS expanded their definition of WIL to include a wide range of hands-on curricula such as internships, apprenticeships, field work, practicums, clinical placements, and other types of practical experience (Galarneau et al., 2020). Similarly, many organizations have specific inclusion and/or exclusion categories when defining work-integrated learning. The Business Council of Canada (2015) explains how the inconsistency in definition can generate administrative or funding issues as well as lead to discrepancy between the expectations of employers and students. The plurality in the definition of WIL may also present "a barrier to the development of a unified strategy" (Business Council of Canada, 2015, p. 12). Despite the variations in the definition of WIL, the common principle is that WIL programs provide students

an opportunity to integrate the learned knowledge from classrooms with working experiences in practical settings (Bowen & Drysdale, 2017). In other words, any educational model that allows learning to take place by combining theoretical concepts with practical skills can be termed as work-integrated learning.

2.5 Canadian Landscape of Work-Integrated Learning Programs

Canadian research studies predominantly examine the topic of work-integrated learning using quantitative data from National Graduate Survey (NGS) and Longitudinal and International Study of Adults (LISA). Unlike the former set of data that focuses heavily on traditional WIL programs such as co-op and work placements, the latter adopts a wider lens to analyze the interactions between work experiences gained through both academic and non-academic programs (Martin & Rouleau, 2020). Although European and American post-secondary institutions were the early ambassadors of work-integrated learning programs, Canadian universities and colleges gradually followed their footsteps after acknowledging the efficacy of such programs. In 1957, the University of Waterloo (UW) was the first in Canada to adopt WIL programs in the form of co-operative education (co-op). Similar to the *British Sandwich Program* at the University of Sunderland and Schneider's co-op program at the University of Cincinnati discussed above in Chapter 2.3, the University of Waterloo initially launched WIL in the engineering department with a cohort of 74 students. In 1962, UW's co-op program expanded to include the Department of Physics. It was not until 1975 when the first Faculty of Arts co-op program began for Economics students, emphasizing the value of work-integrated learning in post-secondary education for different fields of study (University of Waterloo, 2023a).

Though the University of Waterloo was the first to recognize the value of work-integrated learning programs, it is no longer the only institution. From 1970's onwards, WIL expanded quickly in both colleges and universities across Canada, primarily as co-op programs. According to the Council of Ministers of Education (2022), there are currently 223 universities and 213 institutions consisting of colleges and other post-secondary schools in Canada. Among these, 55 universities, 26 colleges, and 3 institutions offer WIL in the form of co-op programs which is 19.26% of Canadian post-secondary institutions (Tamburri, 2014). With the rise in demand of WIL placements, the Canadian Association for Co-operative Education (CAFCE) was founded in 1973 which is a national, non-profit organization that represents governments, post-secondary instructors, employers, and students in the co-operative education model. Through CAFCE, co-op practitioners from Canadian post-secondary institutions receive various opportunities to come together to exchange ideas and promote the benefits of co-op programs for the advancement of work-integrated learning (Co-operative Education Manual, 2005). In 2015, the Business Council of Canada established the Business/Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) which is a national forum consisting of representatives from businesses, universities, colleges, and polytechnics, who support young Canadians as they transition from school to work post-graduation. Within the same year, BHER employed Academia Group—a higher education agency—to examine the scope of WIL programs available in Canadian post-secondary institutions, to understand the extent to which students participate in WIL programs and to identify the current best practices implemented in WIL programs.

In Chapter 2.4, the broad definition of WIL was discussed, however, Business/Higher Education Roundtable (2015) presented a specific definition that is not only compatible with the one adopted by Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), but it is also more

representative of WIL programs in Canada, which is the following: "Work-integrated learning is the process through which students come to learn from experiences in educational and practical settings. It includes the kinds of curriculum and pedagogic practices that can assist, provide, and effectively integrate learning experiences in both settings" (BHER, 2015, p. 4).[1] Consistent with this definition of WIL, there are seven traditional models of WIL programs in Canada for post-secondary students which are: Co-operative education (co-op), apprenticeship, internship, field placement, applied research project, service learning, mandatory professional practicum/clinical placement, applied research project; each has its own set of objectives, criteria, and policies (see Table 1 on the next page) (BHER, 2015).

[1]BHER (2015) definition of WIL is the one that I have used in this research project.

Table 1: Traditional WIL Models in Canada

WIL Model	Definitions
Co-operative Education (Co-op)	Co-op is a type of WIL model in which students get opportunities to work while pursuing a post-secondary degree. Co-op programs alternate between periods of work and study, allowing students to apply the knowledge that they have learned in classroom settings with practical work experiences in real-world situations.
Apprenticeship	An apprenticeship is a program that integrates in-school training with on-the-job training for employment in a skilled trade position. Apprenticeships typically combine about 80% on-the-job experience with 20% classroom preparation, but both are essential elements of the learning experience.
Internship	An internship is usually 12-16 months in length which involves a paid or unpaid work placement that is field-specific, structured, and supervised. Internships may be completed for academic credit or for practice-based work experience. Students typically engage in internships at the middle or end of a program prior to graduation.
Field Placement	A field placement provides students with short-term, intensive hands-on experiences in an environment that is relevant to their academic discipline. The primary goal of field work is to train students how to practically deal with the circumstances that are applicable to their field of study.
Applied Research Project	Project-based research work involves tackling real-world problems. The objective of participating in applied projects is to strengthen the ties between educational institutions and industries by engaging in research that occurs in workplaces such as community-based projects or consulting projects.
Mandatory Professional Practicum/ Clinical Placement	Mandatory professional practicum or clinical placements refer to any practice-based work experience that is required for the completion of a program as well as to obtain professional certification. These types of discipline-specific placements are typically conducted under the guidance of registered or licensed professionals who are experienced in the field.
Service Learning	Service learning combines classroom knowledge with meaningful community service experiences. Through a partnership with a community-based organization, students receive benefits and reciprocates those to the community as well, while advancing both civic and academic outcomes. This process not only enriches the learning experiences for students, but also solidifies their bonds with the community.

Business/Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) (2015). Taking the Pulse of Work-Integrated Learning in Canada. *BHER – Academica Group, pp. 1-74.*

Along with the seven traditional types of WIL listed above in Table 1, there are two new forms of WIL that have emerged in recent years which are incubators/accelerators and bootcamps/hackathons, making it a total of nine types of WIL that are currently available across many Canadian post-secondary institutions (BHER, 2015). Incubators are formal and informal resources such as office space, legal services, and other business assistance services for aspiring entrepreneurs who are in their early stage of business development. Accelerators also offer similar resources and services but for more advanced-level ventures. These types of WIL programs provide students the opportunity to develop their ideas, participate in competitions, access campus-based funding opportunities, and earn course credits where applicable (Sa et al., 2014). For example, *Velocity* at the University of Waterloo is the world's largest startup incubator that provides students the access to knowledge, tools, workspaces, mentor programs, and other resources that can help students transform into entrepreneurs. Similarly, Simon Fraser University has *VentureLabs* which is a world-class business accelerator program that is in partnership with several other Canadian institutions. Funding for these types of work-integrated learning opportunities is available through the *Canada Accelerator and Incubator Program,* which distributed $10.7 million dollars to Toronto Metropolitan University, Simon Fraser University, and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in 2015 to support incubator and accelerator programs (BHER, 2015).

The second emerging form of WIL includes bootcamps and hackathons. Bootcamps are short-term courses, usually 9 to 12 weeks in duration, that are focused on practical skills development related to web, programming, and software. Although bootcamps fall under the umbrella of work-integrated learning programs, they are typically private educational opportunities that are not frequently associated with public post-secondary institutions. On the

other hand, hackathons are events in which developers collaborate to create software or hardware projects on a specific theme or application prototype. Hackathons are becoming increasingly popular in the 21st century as they provide students with the prospect of acquiring practical and professional skills while expanding their networks. Thus, post-secondary institutions often host hackathons and invite organizational representatives to engage as recruiters, mentors, or sponsors (Lethbridge College, 2021; Zionia & Sathyapriya, 2021). Within the work-integrated learning ecosystem, the newer forms of WIL that emerged as a respond to the needs of employers in the rapidly changing labour markets are comparatively less structured and more flexible co-curricular experiences than the seven traditional forms of WIL listed in Table 1.

Regardless of the type of WIL, all of them have three key elements: 1) *Systematic training*, in which the workplace is an important component of the learning experience; 2) *Structured work experience,* in which students emerge in the world of work to gain practical experiences while pursuing post-secondary education; 3) *Institutional partnerships*, in which educational activities such as learning takes place to obtain community or industry-related goals (Cooper, Orwell, & Bowden., 2010). Moreover, there are seven standard evaluation categories of WIL typologies that are used to distinguish them from other work experience which are: 1) the main purpose of participating in the WIL program; 2) the context in which the WIL participation takes place; 3) the nature of the WIL program; 4) the curriculum of the WIL program; 5) the learning that takes place through the WIL program; 6) the partnerships between the institution and student in a WIL program; 7) the support provided to the student and the workplace as part of the WIL program (Cooper, Orwell, & Bowden., 2010). As depicted in Figure 4 below, these seven criteria represent the outer nodes of the dimensions of the WIL wheel (see next page). These seven evaluation criteria are the guiding principles of work-integrated learning that help to differentiate

the typologies of WIL programs and demarcate them from regular work experience that falls outside the scope of WIL. In addition to these dimensions, the "CANWILL" framework was developed by Cantalini-Williams (2015) to ensure effective work-integrated learning experiences for students, representing the inner nodes of the WIL wheel (see Figure 4). In the CANWILL framework, each letter is an acronym (Curriculum; Assessment; Networking; Workplace; Integration; Learning; Logistics) which stands for critical components of WIL that contribute to the smooth delivery of a WIL program. The role of each component is self-explanatory as it does precisely what it stands for. For example, the 'C' for curriculum of WIL indicates that an appropriate curriculum is necessary for a WIL program to be successful. Similarly, the 'A' for assessment procedures implies that a WIL program must be assessed as per the organizational rules and regulations to ensure efficiency, and so forth.

Figure 4: Dimensions of WIL Programs in Canada

Bleakney, J. (2019). What is Work-Integrated Learning? *Elon University.* Retrieved from https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/what-is-work-integrated-learning/

Despite having the above dimensions of WIL programs in theory, it is important to note that not all Canadian WIL programs operate as per these procedures in practicality. While some have rigorous methods of evaluation processes to ensure that students are adequately learning the transferable soft-skills, other programs do not facilitate the same level of review. Aside from evaluation, the payment may also differ based on the type of WIL. Although many Canadian WIL programs are funded by the federal or provincial government, a handful of them are unpaid (Government of Canada, 2019). Irrespective of whether WIL is associated with a financial incentive or not, the advantages of WIL are unparallel as it allows students to combine classroom knowledge with practice-based tasks in the workforce, resulting in an easier school to work transition for graduates (Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020; Martin & Rouleau, 2020).

Furthermore, on the topic of work-integrated learning programs, experiential education is another concept that is frequently used in conjunction with WIL in sociological literature. Experiential learning refers to the specific techniques that an individual can implement to acquire knowledge from real-world settings (Kolb, 1984; Roberts, 2012), and one of such techniques is work-integrated learning (Sattler, 2011). Essentially, learning becomes experiential when the learner is directly in contact with the realities under investigation instead of merely theorizing the phenomena being studied (LaCroix, 2019). As higher education continues to experience pressure from employers to prepare students for the labour market, experiential learning is also becoming widely institutionalized across Canada (LaCroix, 2022a). As a result of this institutionalization of experiential education, there has been a subsequent increase in WIL programs in Ontario over the past few years to enhance skills acquisition training and career development of post-secondary students, with the goal of bridging the theory-practice gap between higher education and employment (Stirling et al., 2020).

CHAPTER 2:
SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 provided a holistic overview of the controversial debate on higher education's accountability in graduate employability—often referred to as the "blame game"—in which employers critique post-secondary institutions for inadequately training students for the labour market, while emphasizing on the lack of soft skills (Succi & Wiendt, 2019). On the other hand, post-secondary institutions primarily associate academic success to individual-level attributes such as parenting techniques, parental educational background, socio-economic disparities, and achievement gaps among others factors that have been empirically proven to impact students' educational attainment and life outcomes in adulthood (Aurini & Hillier, 2018; Bertolini et al., 2012; Davies, Aurini, & Hillier, 2022; Hurrell, 2016; Lareau, 2011; Mayor & Suarez, 2019). Despite the lack of consensus in accountability of graduate employability in this "blame game," all stakeholders agree that there is a growing demand for graduates to be "workplace ready" with a heightened importance on the possession of transferable soft-skills (Washor, 2015, p. 5). In line with this argument, many researchers have suggested that an effective way of helping students to acquire the soft-skills in post-secondary institutions is through work-integrated learning (WIL) programs which provide students the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings while gaining practical skills (Martin & Rouleau, 2020; Jackson & Wilton, 2016). As for WIL, it was originally founded in 1903 in England, followed by 1906 in USA, and finally in 1957 in Canada at the University of Waterloo which is currently the home to world's largest co-op institution. Although WIL initially began in the engineering department in all these nations, it is now globally recognized as an effective pedological approach in modern education system in many disciplines. Despite this increased global recognition, it is important to note that the level of awareness and opportunities vary among different fields of study, with the Faculty of Arts having the least exposure (Li, 2016), resulting in a greater urgency to prioritize WIL in this particular discipline in order to help Arts students develop the necessary soft skills for the labour market which can ultimately contribute towards their smooth transition from school to work.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In work-integrated learning literature, there are three prominent theories which emerged over the past few decades. Each theory has a different set of propositions and perceives WIL in a distinctive manner. First, the human capital theory views WIL as an economic investment and as a human capital development technique that can contribute towards the productivity and efficacy levels of graduates upon entry into the workforce (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019). The second theory is credentialism, in which WIL is interpreted as a by-product of educational expansions based on employers' demands rather than a functional necessity (Collins, 1979; Walters, 2004), and as a supplementary micro-credential that can enhance a post-secondary degree and serve as evidence of skills competency to employers (Ashcroft et al., 2021). The third theoretical perspective derives from the situated learning theory which considers WIL as an essential component of knowledge and skills acquisition while claiming that students are more likely to learn by participating actively in the real-world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, situated learning theory also perceives WIL as a dual-learning opportunity where students can learn *from* practice by observation and *in* practice by application. While these three theorical perspectives contribute towards the understanding of WIL as an educational model and its potential implications on labour market outcomes, these theories also have been critiqued for their shortfalls which are addressed in detail below (see Chapter 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3).

3.1 Human Capital Theory

In historical and contemporary literature concerning the topic of work-integrated learning programs, one of the dominating theories is the human capital theory (HCT) which was originally introduced in the 1950s by academicians, Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker at the Chicago

School of Economics, USA (Tan, 2014; Teixeira, 2014). They defined human capital as the intangible economic value of an individual's "innate/acquired characteristics" such as experience, skills, and knowledge (Tan, 2014, p. 412). The ideologies of HCT emerged from neoclassical economic theory that considers supply and demand as the key driving forces behind production, consumption, and pricing of goods. According to neoclassical theorists, the primary motive is to maximize financial capacity which aligns with the viewpoints of human capital theorists who advocate the necessity of developing human capital for monetary gain in the labour market (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Tan, 2014).

Although HCT has underlying economic principles, it is not a mere economic theory but rather a comprehensive approach that explains a wide range of human affairs in various disciplines including sociology, while keeping education at its focal point (Davies & Guppy, 2010; Walters, 2004). This theory views education as the "prime human capital investment" (Sweetland, 1996, p. 341) because learning and skills training have been empirically proven to contribute to health and nutritional enhancement factors (Schultz, 1963) as well as financial and economic elements (Johnes, 1993). HCT is an extension of Marxism ideology that treats labor as a commodity in capitalist society in which social class struggles—between the bourgeoisie (business owners) and proletariat (workers)—is placed at the center. HCT extends Marxism by attributing labor to individual factors instead of class-related factors to reflect the modern economic relations in the 21st century job markets (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). HCT can also be perceived as an economic variant of the technical functional theory which claims that education responds to industrial growth by becoming innovators of new technologies to meet the demands of the progressing labour market (Walters, 2004).

WIL as an Economic Investment for the Labour Market

Proposition 1: *Work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education is an economic investment which can increase the employability of graduates, resulting in a smoother school-to-work transition.*

From the perspectives of human capital theorists, work-integrated learning is an economic investment that can improve graduate employability due to increased productivity and efficacy levels from WIL participation (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Sweetland, 1996). Through work-integrated learning programs and practice-based experiences, students can increase their marketability and meet the expectations of employers (Martin & Rouleau, 2020; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Sattler & Peters, 2012). As discussed in Chapter 2.2, employers expect graduates to be "workplace ready" after completing their post-secondary education which means having a combination of both hard and soft-skills (Washor, 2015, p. 5). Many employers complain that this expectation is currently not being met, emphasizing the lack of transferable soft-skills that are required to navigate the labour market mechanisms (Hurrell, 2016; Succi & Wieandt, 2019). Regarding these demands of employers from new graduates, human capital theorists are likely to argue that one way to bridge the soft-skills gap between higher education and employment is to train students through human development processes, in which skills acquisition should be placed at the core. Through this human development approach, students can increase their competencies to fulfill the requirements of current employers in the highly competitive job markets (OECD, 2016; OCED, 1996). Human capital theorists may further add that WIL is a key human development process as it combines academic concepts learned in classroom settings with work experiences in the real-world to gain transferable soft-skills (Sattler & Peters, 2012; Sweetland, 1996; Teixeira, 2014). Therefore, since work-integrated learning programs can enhance knowledge, experience, and skills, it would be considered an economic investment for the labour

market (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Sweetland, 1996; Teixeira, 2014).

WIL as a Human Capital Development Technique

Proposition 2: *Work-integrated learning programs can help students focus on the development of human capital such as soft-skills acquisition, which may shift the emphasis that post-secondary institutions place on grading and certifying students.*

Using the lens of human capital theory, the proponents of this perspective would predict that work-integrated learning can help students develop human capital which may dilute the concentration that post-secondary institutions attribute to grading and certifying students (Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Schinske & Tanner, 2014). This perception is consistent with various studies and articles that expressed grades can have long-lasting consequences on students' mental health and well-being (Hogberg et al., 2019; Morgan, 2020), while others question the accuracy of the 'A' – 'F' evaluating system, given well-documented patterns in grade inflation (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). In *Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently),* Schinske and Tanner (2014) also state that emphasizing on grades can result in deviating away from the intrinsic purpose of education, which in this case is acquiring hard and soft-skills in the form of human capital that can enhance the labour market outcomes for graduates.

Aligned with this concern of focusing primarily on grading and certifying, Kromydas (2017) refers to a research study by Williams (2001) to pinpoint how current policies in post-secondary institutions are driven by profit-mechanisms which resulted in higher education to transform into a "franchise" that is delivering a "brand-name product" that holds institutional prestige and reputational values (Kromydas, 2017, p. 6). Degrees and certifications in higher education are now perceived as commercial tools for economic gains; it is no longer a means for human capital development—a serious concern among students. Parents also place a higher

importance on acquiring the necessary skillsets and credentials rather than the status of the institutions (Aurini et al., 2020). In particular, for-profit educational institutions have been receiving an increased number of "allegations of fraud and other questionable practices" from all stakeholders including students and parents regarding their operational mechanisms (Beaver, 2012, p. 274). To shift the focus from grading and certifying, human capital theorists recommend concentrating on skills development processes such as WIL as it encourages students to combine theoretical knowledge with practice-based tasks in the real-world (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018). This process of human capital development through WIL can help students gather work experience that employers seek, resulting in fewer transitional barriers from post-secondary institution to the labour market (Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020).

Critiques of Human Capital Theory

Regardless of the strengths in human capital theory (HCT), there are a few drawbacks that limit the ability to apply its theoretical ideologies to all work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education (Tan, 2014). For instance, HCT assumes a "single linear pathway" on the dynamic passages between heterogenous education systems and changing labour market in modern societies (Marginson, 2017, p. 2). HCT cannot answer why some groups of graduates may benefit more from WIL programs than others, or why certain WIL programs such as co-op versus a clinical placement may (or may not) have a larger economic value when compared to other types of WIL. Marginson (2017) who researches on higher education revealed that there is indeed a "gap" between the world perceived using the lens of human capital theory and the lived-in-world in which the theory is applied. The failure to satisfy the "test of realism" emerged as a result of

operating on a universal lens that is exclusive and has a fixed theoretical framework, in which HCT assumes that there is only one possible truth about any given phenomenon (Marginson, 2017, p. 6).

Similar to Margison (2017), other theorists have also critiqued HCT by stating that it suffers from the fallacy of composition as it cannot be extended to society as a whole (Tan, 2014). Issues such as social marginalizing, poverty alleviation, wage gap differences, social hierarchy, and power structures have been overlooked in human capital theory (Choudhury & Choudhury, 2022). In particular, opponents of HCT argue that it does not adequately address the social, structural, and individual factors that contribute to the reproduction of inequalities and give some groups an easier access to education than others (Bernstein, 1973; Smith, 1990), such as not all work-integrated programs are equally accessible to the post-secondary student population or all fields of study in Canada (Government of Canada, 2019). Another critique of HCT was made by John Mill, a philosopher and political economist, who stated that people of a country should not be looked upon as a wealth of that country, however, this philosophical viewpoint was quickly dismissed by other economists and researchers since human capital development has been empirically proven to be associated with economic gains (Kolomiiets & Petrushenko, 2017). Reflecting on all the critiques, although the human capital theory can explain why work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education are perceived as economic investment for the labour market or as a human capital development technique, it fails to explain why certain groups of graduates benefit more or less from participating in WIL programs, why some WIL programs may have a larger financial value in the workforce than others, and how social, cultural, political factors play a role in the relationship between WIL programs and labour market outcomes.

3.2 Credentialism

Considering the methodological issues of the human capital theory, there has been an emergence of new theories such as credentialism which provides a more critical perspective on the gap between higher education and employment (Walters, 2004). Credentialism is the practice of relying heavily on credentials (e.g., academic degrees, diplomas, or certifications) when making hiring decisions in the job market or assigning social status in a given setting. To put it differently, credentials are being utilized as a bureaucratic screening device (Davies & Guppy, 2010). This is highly problematic from the perspective of credential theorists because competency-related decisions are being taken primarily on the basis of credentials instead of directly evaluating an individual's abilities, (Brown, 2001; Walters, 2004). Consequently, the value of education in the contemporary labour market has begun to depend more on the acquired formal credentials and less on the specific knowledge and skills learned through education (Berg, 1970; Collins, 1979). Adjacent to this premise, Brown (2001) states that the occupational importance of credentials is more cultural than technical, resulting in degree title to be perceived as a higher requirement in a credential society than the knowledge or skills acquired. Credential theorists also argue that the official recognition of credentials such as formal qualifications are closely linked with positional power within the workforce. In other words, credentials are governed by dominating status groups and elite parties who use them as entry barriers to their organization (Brown, 2001).

The trajectory of credentialism in Sociology of Education began with Max Weber (1916/1951) who was the first to acknowledge the practice of credentialism. The theory of credentialism was discussed in Weber's stratification analysis and status-group domination within educational institutions in the early 1900's (Brown, 2001; Brown, 1995). Weber's (1951) noteworthy work, the *Religion of China,* which was originally published in 1916, portrays how the

ancient Chinese testing systems (e.g., the Confucian examination procedures) granted access to sectarian religious communities, economic or political resources, and other privileged services solely based on credentials (e.g., mastery of esoteric texts) rather than technical competencies. Brown (2001) asserts that the ancient Chinese examination procedure is equivalent to the formalized credential requirements for employment in the modern labour market. Throughout Weber's work on educational credentialism, he took a strong stance stating that academic credentials and the demands of modern work had little relationship, and rather more of a "cultural-political construction of competence" (Brown, 2001, p. 21). Through this statement, Weber suggests that educational degrees and certifications are prioritized heavily, and technical competencies are often overlooked in the labour market. Similar to Weber, Ivar Berg (1970) was one of the first theorists to acknowledge the focus on credential requirements of employers instead of individual's competencies for particular tasks. Despite Weber (1916/51) and Berg (1970) recognizing the rise of credentialism in the labour markets, the credential theory became more influential after the publication of Randall Collins (1979)'s book, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification,* which is now considered the hallmark of credentialism (Davies & Guppy, 2010; Walters, 2004).

Credentialism is also a tool of to create a monopoly and raise the value of a job position by restricting entry which is why it's a classic process within professions that are attempting to raise their worth such as white-collar jobs, bureaucratic institutions, and public trust organizations that provide social services (Collins, 1974). In fact, Collins (1974) stated that the practice of hiring on the basis of educational credentials rather than technical competencies is prominent in these industries as employers require workers to possess skills that may be difficult to measure such as critical thinking, analytical ability, and leadership qualities. Since employers cannot directly assess

these skills, they assume that anyone who has earned credentials must have these competencies. This is one of Collins's (1979) central arguments that employers are relying disproportionately on credentials to match workers to lucrative jobs simply because they have more formal qualifications instead of assessing whether they truly are more competent in terms of applying practical skills in real-world situations. For this reason, Collins (1979) stated that educational credentials have transformed into "artificial good", and graduates are expected to possess an adequate amount of it to be hired in reputable positions (Collins, 1979, p. 183).

WIL as a By-Product of Educational Expansion

Proposition 1: *Work-integrated learning programs are a by-product of educational expansions in the contemporary era based on employers' demands rather than a functional necessity.*

From the perspective of credentialism, work-integrated learning is viewed as a by-product of the expansion of institutional features and educational advancements based on employers' demands rather than a functional necessity in the workforce. Credential theorists are more likely to question the extent to which WIL programs play a role in the school-to-work transitions and whether it makes a significant difference in labour market outcomes (Walters, 2004). This is because credential theorists claim that there is a weak connection between academic credentials and the actual skills that are necessary to perform a job (Davies & Guppy, 2010). Credential theorists further add that many employers in the 21st century are filtering out potential candidates as part of mass hiring merely based on their educational credentials without assessing their capabilities case by case. This resulted in credential theorists to raise the question whether graduates are being hired as per their possession of knowledge and skills or as per a piece of certification handed to them by post-secondary institutions to be used in the workforce as a voucher of competencies (Brown, 2001; Walters, 2004).

Due to the increasing demand of post-secondary credentials among employers, Collins (1979) warns his readers in *the Credential Society* that there is a "rise of a competitive system for producing abstract cultural currency in the form of educational credentials" which he claims is the new force contributing to social stratification (Collins, 1979, p. 94). Through this statement, Collins (1979) implies that the heightened importance on educational credentials is giving birth to new forms of social inequalities in higher education that were not present before. As a result of the reproduction and reinforcement of social inequalities through credentialism, the advocates of credential theorists are less likely to see the benefits of increased educational credentials among graduates. Based on this, in the case of work-integrated learning, credential theorists may not consider WIL programs as a necessity for the labour market, but rather they may perceive it as a by-product of educational expansions and institutional advancements.

WIL as a Supplementary Micro-credential

Proposition 2: *Graduates who acquire a higher number of micro-credentials from participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education are more likely to be hired by employers in the 21st century labour markets.*

Considering the ideologies of credentialism, work-integrated learning may be perceived as a supplementary micro-credential that can help graduates secure employment upon entry into the labour market. Micro-credentials are short discipline-specific programs that offer academic credits or certifications (Ashcroft et al., 2021). Since WIL is a recognizable formal work experience, it can be presented to employers as evidence of skills acquisition (Martin & Rouleau, 2020; Walters, 2004). As Collins (1979) stated, credentials are cultural currencies that can be used to evaluate an individual's abilities to perform a task. In line with this proposition, the higher the credentials, the

more equipped an individual is likely to be when attempting to find employment (Hill, 2019). Consistent with this viewpoint, credential theorists would argue that the higher the micro-credentials a graduate obtains from participating in WIL programs, the greater their chance of being hired by employers in the 21st century labour market.

In addition, credential theorists are likely to argue that WIL as a micro-credential can act as further proof of educational qualifications by supplementing the existing post-secondary degree or diploma (Ashcroft et al., 2021; Gallagher, 2018). This is because any micro-credentials or alternative credentials including WIL can present evidence of a specific set of skills that cannot be exclusively represented by traditional academic degrees or diplomas (Ashcroft et al., 2021). A 2018 survey on the use of educational credentials in hiring found that the top recommendation from employers for higher education is the inclusion of WIL and to provide academic credentials for on-the-job learning (Gallagher, 2018). This indicates employers prefer to see formal validation of the skills students develop through WIL programs. Based on these findings, it is highly likely that employers may perceive WIL experience as supplementary micro-credentials that can complement the post-secondary degree or diploma. Therefore, graduates who acquire a higher number of micro-credentials from participating in WIL programs are more likely to be hired by employers.

Critiques of Credentialism

The major criticism towards credentialism is that it practices a "narrow reflexivity," implying that it leaves several areas unexplored which places a question mark on its explanatory power (Fuller, 1999). On one hand, credentialism acknowledges that employers are relying excessively on academic credentials during hiring processes instead of evaluating whether a

potential candidate is truly competent in terms of applying practical skills in the workplace. On the other hand, this theoretical perspective fails to recognize the value of education in the job market, and how using credentials as a background screening tool can be particularly beneficial in certain occupational sectors. For instance, there are several disciplines in which hiring based on credentials have proven to be successful such as in healthcare and medical professions where certifications or licensure are necessary to confirm that an individual is qualified to fulfill a task (O'Connor, 2021). Law is other another common area where credentials such as a Juris Doctor (J.D.) degree, barrister and solicitor licensing, and certification from articling or a law practice program are utilized "to ensure that candidates have demonstrated they possess the required entry-level competencies" (Law Society of Ontario, 2023). Ensuring this is possible through credentials because it provides proof of documentation that the candidate is trained to offer legal services that is in the public interest (Robinson, 2023). Teachers, engineers, and software developers are a few other professions where credentials are frequently used to check whether the candidate is eligible to fulfill the job requirements (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). Therefore, credentials can be relevant in numerous occupations where the job duties are more specialized, and thus, credential theorists are often critiqued for overlooking the value of educational qualifications as it can be instrumental in many fields.

3.3 Situated Learning Theory

After the human capital theory and credentialism, a new dominating theory emerged in work-integrated learning literature which is known as the situated learning theory (SLT). This theory is prominent in sociology of education literature that presents the perspectives of those who are proponents of work-integrated learning programs (Bouwer, Venketsamy, & Bipath, 2021;

Korthagen, 2010; Lave & Wenger; 1991). Over the past few decades, the applicability of situated learning approaches has been explored not only within the sociology of education literature but also in other domains of contemporary research involving religion and spirituality (Westerlund, 2021), crime and deviance (Gallupe & Bouchard, 2013), and organizational culture (Raz, 2006). However, situated learning theory was first introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991 in their book, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* In this book, the scholars defined SLT as a learning process in which individuals have the opportunity to participate in the socio-cultural practices of a community (Fuller et al., 2005; Zheng, 2010). The central argument of the authors is that learning can best occur if it involves the whole person, meaning that the learner should be situated in the social activities of a community. In this manner, the learner can absorb the required knowledge and skills as they move from the "new-comer" status towards full participation status—a learning process known as the *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). As per this conceptual argument, the learning process is thus an "evolving form of membership" within a community in which the learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53).

Lave and Wenger's inspiration behind establishing the situated learning theory was a result of their dissatisfaction with the "asocial character" of traditional learning theory that defines learning as a "discrete cognitive process" in which the learner is a vessel of taught knowledge (Fuller et al., 2005, p. 50). In other words, the authors disagree with traditional theorists who view learning as an individual process with a beginning and end rather than a continuous activity. The authors further challenge the ideologies of traditional learning theory by stating that it conveniently overlooks the implications of learning in the real-world where the taught knowledge is applied (Floding & Swier, 2011). Similar to Lave and Wenger (1991), other contemporary theorists also

critique the traditional learning theory because it lacks the community of practice aspect in which ideas can be exchanged, knowledge can be shared, and collaborative activities can take place (Gowlland, 2014; Morrell, 2003). From a holistic perspective, the underlying philosophies of SLT and WIL do not align with conventional learning that occurs exclusively within the confined walls of a classroom and limits the learner's absorbing capacity (Bouwer, Venketsamy, & Bipath, 2021; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

WIL as an Effective Method of Skills Acquisition

Proposition 1: *Work-integrated learning is an essential component of skills acquisition as students are more likely to develop transferable skills by combining classroom knowledge with practice-based experiences that are situated in real-world settings.*

Based on the principles of situated learning theory (SLT), work-integrated learning is an essential component of skills acquisition because students are more likely to learn by participating actively in real-world situations (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated learning theorists and proponents of work-integrated learning suggest that if new learners could have the opportunity to apply what they have learned by situating themselves in their community, there is a greater chance for them to understand the materials (Bouwer, Venketsamy, & Bipath, 2021; Handley et al. 2006; Patel, 2017; Theodorakopoulos & Figueira, 2012). These claims are also supported by Zheng's (2010) study which reveals that situated learning has a positive effect on the learner's performance compared to traditional methods where practice-based learning is absent. Catalano's (2015) study takes it a step further and concludes using empirical evidence that knowledge acquired outside the classroom is more transferable and applicable in the lived-in-world.

Similar to the concept of work-integrated learning, the ideologies of situated learning theory lie on the notion of acquiring skills from hands-on activities instead of merely relying on theorical analysis (Bowen & Drysdale, 2017; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In essence, situated learning theory makes the assertion that learning cannot be extrapolated from the situation in which it is applied as learning authentically derives from the situation itself (Theodorakopoulos & Figueira, 2012; Zheng, 2010). From this viewpoint, work-integrated learning is an ideal method of developing skills for the labour market because WIL allows students to apply their theoretical knowledge in practical situations to gather experiences that are transferable to the workforce (Jackson & Collings, 2018).

WIL as a Dual-Learning Opportunity

Proposition 2: *Work-integrated learning programs provide an opportunity to learn 'in' practice and learn 'from' practice by situating oneself in natural environments where the learned knowledge can be applied.*

In the case of work-integrated learning programs, as per the situated learning theory, WIL allows "learning *in* practice and learning *from* practice" (Bouwer, Venketsamy & Bipath, 2021, p. 18). Learning *in* practice takes place when the learner observes another individual practicing the technique, whereas learning *from* practice occurs when the learner practices the technique on their own within the situated learning environment (Assan, 2014). An example of learning *in* and *from* practice can be found in Hawkins and Rogers' (2016) study on student teachers' learning experiences. The authors found that working in a school or classroom setting to observe as well as to practice teaching can be instrumental for student teachers in terms of developing their professional skills. This is because it allows the student teachers to interact with their colleagues, mentors, and educators to discuss common interests such as their lesson planning strategies,

teaching methods, and their experiences of being in the WIL program.

Like Hawkins and Rogers (2016) work on student teachers' experiences of practicing teaching in the community, Bouwer, Venketsamy, and Bipath (2021) conducted a similar research study on student teachers' involvements in WIL programs and grounded their findings on situated learning theory to have an in-depth understanding of the participants' viewpoints. According to Bouwer and her research team (2021), the student teachers who participated in WIL programs expressed that there were several associated benefits as WIL provided them an opportunity to develop skills that are needed to teach their own classes post-graduation. Their findings also showed that WIL programs help participants understand their own position and the role of others, which ultimately allows them to reflect on their performance and improve it accordingly. Based on the above studies, students who engage in situated learning experiences including WIL programs have a lower chance of encountering barriers when transitioning from higher education to employment. Therefore, situated-learning theorists are more likely to support WIL programs and perceive it as an essential component of a successful educational model that can maximize knowledge and skills acquisition (Bouwer, Venketsamy & Bipath, 2021; Hawkins and Rogers, 2016).

Critiques of Situated Learning Theory

In general, most commentators do not disagree with the values presented by the situated learning approach, but rather they critique the lack of theoretical acknowledgement of the diversities in learning. To elaborate, situated learning theory claims that the most effective way of learning occurs when learners emerge themselves in a community of practice and become full participants in order to apply the taught knowledge from classroom to the real-world (Fuller et al.,

2005; Zheng, 2010), such as through work-integrated learning programs (Bouwer, Venketsamy & Bipath, 2021). However, this theory does not take into account that not everyone is able learn the contents in the same manner. While some groups of students may benefit from situated learning approach, others may struggle to adjust in real-world settings and may prefer traditional learning methods within classrooms (Renkl, 2001). This is the classic case of how learning styles (e.g., visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) vary among students, and the ability to foster an inclusive learning environment that caters to different learning styles can enable teachers to augment the academic experience for students (Romanelli et al., 2009). Despite the lack of acknowledgement of different learners' needs, situated learning approach has proven to benefit students, specifically in terms of skills development through work-integrated learning programs (Bouwer, Venketsamy & Bipath, 2021; Hawkins and Rogers, 2016).

3.4 Comparison of the Three Theoretical Perspectives

Due to the frequency of hiring based on credentials in the contemporary job market, there is an ongoing controversial debate among human capital theorists and credential theorists about whether post-secondary institutions are training students adequately to develop human capital in the form of transferable skills that are needed for the workforce, or whether they merely provide graduates the credentials that they can utilize as currencies when applying for jobs in which a lower level of schooling is sufficient (Walters, 2004). Tying this to work-integrated learning, as per the human capital theory, WIL is perceived as an economic investment for the labour market and as a human capital development technique. As per the first proposition, WIL programs are viewed as an economic investment by human capital theorists because WIL can increase the productivity and performance levels of graduates when they enter the labour market (Khampirat et al., 2019). This leads to an increase in employability and marketability of graduates, resulting in a smoother

school-to-work transition (Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020). Human capital theorists also propose that work-integrated learning programs can help students focus on the development of human capital, in particular, transferable soft skills, which can shift the emphasis that post-secondary institutions place on grading and certifying students. Emphasizing on grades and certifications can result in deviating away from the intrinsic purpose of education—acquiring transferable knowledge and skills in the form of human capital that can enhance the labour market outcomes for graduates (Schinske & Tanner 2014). For this reason, proponents of HCT view WIL programs as a positive means of developing human capital, a strategic economic investment that can be later used for financial gains in the workforce.

In comparison to human capital theorists, advocates of credentialism are less likely to assign a high merit to work-integrated learning programs. This is because they consider WIL as a by-product of educational expansions and as a supplementary micro-credential that serves the purpose of glorifying a post-secondary degree or diploma. As per the first premise, credential theorists view WIL as a by-product of educational expansions that derived as a response to employers' demands rather than a functional need. This argument has emerged from their assertation that there is a weak connection between academic credentials and the actual skills that are necessary to complete a task, meaning that many job duties in the workplace can be completed without the requirement of a degree or diploma (Davies & Guppy, 2010; Walters, 2004). The second premise of credentialism considers WIL as a supplementary micro-credential as it can enhance the existing post-secondary education (Ashcroft et al., 2021; Gallagher, 2018). Thus, credential theorists are more likely to argue that graduates who acquire a higher number of micro-credentials from participating in WIL programs are also more likely to be hired by employers, whereas human capital theorists would argue that graduates who participate in WIL as an economic

investment to develop human capital have the highest chance of getting hired. Both groups of thinkers are essentially arriving at the same outcome (e.g., WIL contributes to labour market success) but from different theoretical routes.

Unlike human capital theory and credentialism, situated learning theory has received fewer criticisms because it is a newer perspective that has been subjected to less scientific testing compared to the former two theories. Situated learning theorists perceive WIL as an effective method of skills acquisitions as students are more likely to develop transferable skills by combining classroom knowledge with practice-based experiences that are situated in real-world settings (Theodorakopoulos & Figueira, 2012). They also consider WIL as a dual-learning opportunity as WIL programs allow students to learn *in* practice as well as learn *from* practice by situating themselves in the natural environment where the learned knowledge can be applied (Bouwer, Venketsamy, & Bipath, 2021). Furthermore, the ideologies of situated learning theory align more with human capital theory rather than credentialism as the former two theoretical perspectives put a higher importance on the positive implications of WIL programs, whereas the latter theory considers WIL as a mere aftermath of educational expansions and institutional advancements to satisfy employers' demands.

CHAPTER 3:
SUMMARY OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Chapter 3 presented an in-depth analysis of the three dominating theories on the topic of work-integrated learning in contemporary sociological literature which are: *Human Capital Theory* (HCT), *Credentialism,* and *Situated Learning Theory* (SLT) (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Walters, 2004). In this chapter, two propositions from each theory were discussed. For instance, human capital theorists view WIL as an economic investment for the labour market and as a human capital development technique, while credential theorists consider WIL as a by-product of educational expansions and as a supplementary micro-credential. Alternatively, situated learning theorists perceive WIL as an effective method of skills acquisition and as a dual-learning opportunity. Chapter 3 also provided critiques of each theory and a holistic comparison of the three distinctive theoretical perspectives. Among these three theories, the viewpoints of HCT and SLT align more with each other as the proponents of these two theories consider WIL programs to be highly effective in terms of skills development whereas credential theorists are more skeptical about its true functionality in the job market.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

4.1 Philosophical Worldviews

In every scientific study, researchers bring in philosophical assumptions which are interchangeably known as theoretical worldviews. These worldviews consist of a set of beliefs and values that guide the researcher's study and play a key role in the scientific knowledge production (Wallace, 1971). These are important to acknowledge as readers can best interpret the findings if they are aware of the preconceived ideas and the specific stance that is being taken by the researcher (Wright et al., 2016). Philosophical worldviews emerge from a researcher's training, background knowledge, prior experiences, cultural environment, field of study, advisors, and other influential factors which lead them towards a particular research approach or methodological choice (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Schulenberg, 2016).

There are three central classifications of theoretical worldviews which *are positivism/post-positivism, interpretivism/social construction,* and *pragmatism*. The first worldview, positivism/post-positivism, often used in quantitative research, applies the natural science model to explain social phenomenon. According to this worldview, scientific knowledge derives only through empirical observations and measurements. The key distinguish between positivism and post-positivism is that the latter acknowledges empirical methods, results, and interpretations are imperfect; this implies researchers can only get close to the objective truth, but not with absolute certainty (Creswell, 2014). The second worldview, interpretivism/social construction, most frequently adopted in qualitative research, attempts to understand how people make sense of their lives, how people define different situations, and how people reflect on themselves as well as others in social interactions (Andrews, 2012; Gemma, 2018). The third and final worldview is

pragmatism in which the research question drives the method, not the other way around. The central argument of pragmatists is that scientific inquiry cannot overlook the multiple theoretical perspectives and philosophical assumptions, and thus, they suggest using mixed methods as it allows researchers to incorporate a larger spectrum of views on the research topic which can lead us to evaluate the theories that were used to formulate the research questions (deductive) while generating new theories (inductive) (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

The Rationale for Applying Interpretivism and Social Constructionism

Considering all the variations of worldviews, the particular one that underlies the method of this qualitative research project is interpretivism/social constructionism. This worldview is appropriate for this case study because I am exploring the perspectives of Arts students in regard to the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and its implications on potential labour market outcomes. My research goal is not to explain but rather to create an understanding of the social processes and phenomena from the viewpoints of my participants (e.g., Arts students), and thus, it precisely overlaps with the interpretivism/social constructionism ideologies. Like interpretivists and social constructionists, the philosophical assumptions reflected in this project is that social reality is subjective rather than objective, suggesting that it is socially constructed based on the participants' perceptions of the reality. To put it differently, this research project is based on the assumptions that there is more than one singular truth due to a continuous process of dynamic interpretation of the interview data.

4.2 The Rationale for Qualitative Approach

In this case study, to explore the perspectives of Arts students regarding the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and its potential implications of labour market outcomes, a qualitative approach has been taken. This approach is a scientific method of collecting and analyzing non-numerical responses to answer research questions while remaining curious, open-minded, and empathetic towards participants' viewpoints. It also involves the process of "meaning-making" which allows researchers to understand the perspectives of participants in-depth without compromising on methodological and theoretical precisions (Aurini, Health, & Howells, 2021, p. 4). Unlike quantitative research that generates statistical data, qualitative studies produce descriptive data that showcase the various dimensions of social relationships, processes, and phenomena that cannot be quantified (Fossey et al., 2002). Essentially, qualitative methods enable researchers to explore a wide range of factors that guide human behaviours and actions such as motives, aspirations, values, beliefs, and attitudes of participants (Queiros, Faria & Almeida, 2017), which serves the research objectives of this project.

A qualitative approach has been strategically employed for this case study because the first research objective of this project was to critically explore the perspectives of Arts students to understand their viewpoints of the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and labour market outcomes post-graduation. This was attainable through qualitative research because this type of approach provides an opportunity for participants "to define what is central and important in their experiences" (van den Hoonard, 2015, p. 2) which allows researchers to construct ideas, concepts, and themes from the emerging patterns. The second research objective of this project was to identify the key benefits and challenges regarding work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education that Faculty of Arts students tend to encounter. This was

achievable by taking a qualitative approach, specifically interviews which is “an instrument to probe more deeply into the thoughts, experiences, or perceptions of participants” (Aurini, Health, & Howells, 2021, p. 118). By conducting interviews as part of the qualitative approach, the participants of this research project were encouraged to share their insights, such as the advantages and disadvantages of choosing to participate (or not) in WIL programs which helped me detect the important benefits and limitations associated with WIL programs.

The third research objective of this project was to identify the important transferable skills that Arts students have developed and/or expect to develop through work-integrated learning programs to better prepare themselves for the labour market post-graduation. This was feasible through systematically investigating the data using NVivo which is an advanced software for qualitative analysis that allows researchers to identify emerging patterns (Zamawe, 2015), such as the most prevalent benefits, the common challenges, the predominant policies on WIL, and many other themes. The fourth research objective was to act as a lending voice for Arts students to present their recommendations of policies and/or practices that they perceive as effective in terms of bridging the soft -kills gap between higher education and employment through work-integrated learning programs. This was possible through a qualitative approach because students were able to provide their wide range of recommendations and suggestions during the interviews. The final research objective was to make noteworthy contributions to contemporary sociological literature by explaining the nuances of WIL programs in post-secondary education and to what extent WIL plays a role in school-to-work transitions, from the viewpoints of Arts students. This was achievable through qualitative research as this approach allowed me to understand the thought-processes of Arts students in-depth by conversing with them through semi-structured interviews.

4.3 Research Design

Case Study: The World's Largest Co-op Institution (University of Waterloo)

In this research project, I conducted a qualitative case study to explore the perceptions of Arts students regarding the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and its potential implications on labour market outcomes post-graduation. As Aurini, Heath, and Howells (2021) stated, "a case study studies one (or few) instance of a current phenomenon and studies it in depth" (p. 61) which is precisely the objective of this project. There are several benefits of conducting a case study that is comprehensive and rigorous in nature (Krusenvik, 2016). First, a case study can produce raw and descriptive data by capturing the reality of an individual unit of study (Garger, 2013; Merriam-Webster, 2009), and thus, it facilitates a holistic review and increases conceptual creditability (Stake, 1995). Second, compared to other qualitative methods, a case study consists of "more detail, richness, completeness, and variance" which also enhances the creditability of the study (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 301). Most importantly, a case study contributes to the understanding of the context, processes, and phenomenon on a given topic while assisting the researcher to generate new hypotheses, research questions, and theoretical perspectives (Alpi, 2019; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Considering the need to obtain an in-depth, holistic, and comprehensive understanding of Arts students' perspectives of WIL programs from an Ontario post-secondary institution, a case study involving the University of Waterloo (UW) was executed. UW is an ideal option because it is not only home to the most enriched provincial and national co-operative education (co-op)—the dominant type of work-integrated learning program in Canada—but it is also considered world's largest post-secondary co-op institution (University of Waterloo, 2023a). Furthermore, UW is the

first Canadian institution to recognize the value of work-integrated learning programs for all fields of study and offer co-op programs to Arts students from 1975 (University of Waterloo, 2023a). Since this case study focuses on the Faculty of Arts students, choosing an Ontario institution that fosters an inclusive academic environment by providing WIL opportunities to Arts programs is valid and appropriate.

Compared to all other types of work-integrated learning programs, the rationale for conducting a case study involving a co-op institution is due to its high value in the eyes of modern employers and its relevance in the current labour market (Co-operative Education Manual, 2005; RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016; Tamburri, 2014). In the 21st century, under the broad umbrella of work-integrated learning programs, co-op has become an instrumental part of Canadian post-secondary education and a "hot bed" in Ontario (Zha & Wu, 2020, p. 22). This is because co-op provides students an opportunity to integrate the concepts learned in classroom settings with practice-based experiences in the real-world (Co-operative Education Manual, 2005; Drysdale, Goyder & Cardy, 2009; Galarneau, Kinack & Marshall, 2020; Martin & Rouleau, 2020; RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016; Tamburri, 2014).

Similar to other Ontario post-secondary institutions, the University of Waterloo offers co-op in a structured way that allows students to alternate between work and study terms during their academic years. The co-op program at UW is affiliated with 7,100+ employers from approximately 60 different nations who actively recruit students from UW. As noted on the University of Waterloo co-operative education home page, UW students have the opportunity to enroll in co-op programs which provides up to "two years of experience learning how to navigate the hiring process, applying your skills to real-life problems, and learning about yourself along the way" (University of Waterloo, 2023b). Through this interactive educational system, UW helps students

develop transferable soft-skills and prepares students to tackle the complexities of the modern labour market post-graduation.

In addition, focusing on a well-established institution such as the University of Waterloo in which there is an extensive pool of qualifying students for this case study would be considered a fair research site. As John L. Martin (2017) stated, the purpose of a project of this nature or a case study that provides an in-depth understanding of a phenomena is to select a fair sample. Thus, conducting a qualitative case study with Arts students from UW is a supreme choice, especially because UW is undisputedly known as the leader in work-integrated learning as this institution has been successfully integrating co-op programs in the academic curriculum since 1957. It is also important to acknowledge that given the time, scope, and resources of a thesis project for the Master of Arts program, it was not feasible to conduct a research study that is larger in scale or covers a wider range of WIL programs from different Ontario post-secondary institutions. Nonetheless, as noted in Chapter 10.3, *Future Directions*, this project will be expanded in the PhD program to include more institutions.

Case Study: Methodological Considerations

Although case studies have several advantages and serve the purpose of this research project, there are a few methodological considerations that a researcher must reflect on prior to conducting this type of project. It is vital to recognize that case-studies are context-dependent which proponents of the natural science may object by stating that it limits the ability to generate epistemic theory that is predictive and explanatory (Crowe et al, 2011; Rashid et al., 2019). To address this issue, Flyvberg (2006) makes an assertation that it is not necessarily true that concrete knowledge from a case study is less valuable than theoretical knowledge; it is simply a matter of

what the research problem, questions, and objectives are in a particular study. For this reason, Hammersley and his research team (2000) encourage researchers to consider the relationship between a specific case and the context in which it exists. Since the research problem, questions, and objectives of my project require an-in depth understanding of Art students' perceptions from a reputable work-integrated learning program, a case study involving UW is logical for this project.

For case studies, many social scientists stated that there is also a misunderstanding among natural scientists that the results do not have the capacity to contribute towards scientific progression because the findings from this type of study cannot be transferred to the broader population. To challenge this misconception, Flyvberg (2006) claimed that if a researcher carefully selects a "critical case," it can be of great value; critical cases are defined as either "most likely" or "least likely" cases which can work towards falsification of propositions, test of verifications, or representation of a strong exemplar of a phenomenon (p. 307). Small (2009) further reinforces this argument by reasoning that despite the lack of transferability to a greater population, small-sample case studies can hold high credibility. In accordance with this viewpoint, I have chosen to conduct a case study involving participants from the world's largest co-op institution, the University of Waterloo because participants from UW are "most likely" to be aware of work-integrated learning programs, and thus, they can answer various questions on WIL programs. UW is also a strong exemplar of work-integrated learning model in both Canadian and international post-secondary education as mentioned above (see page 59) (BHER, 2015; University of Waterloo, 2023a).

Keeping aside the misconceptions discussed above, it is vital to recognize that case studies require careful methodological considerations as it can be difficult to replicate, expensive to conduct, and the volume of data can be time-consuming to analyze. Regardless of these common

challenges, case studies are vastly appreciated by qualitative researchers due to its ability to produce comprehensive results through systematic exploration (Indeed, 2022), though Siggelkow (2007) emphasizes that it is critically important to be careful of what type of conclusions can be extracted from a case study. As such, I have been reflexive throughout this project, addressed the methodological considerations, and acknowledged the limitations of this project (see Chapter 10.2: *Project Limitations*). I am also aware of the fact that the findings do not represent the viewpoints of all Arts students in Ontario. Nonetheless, my project delivers noteworthy findings regarding the role of WIL programs on school-to-work transitions, and thus, it can be of interest to students, educators, employers, policymakers, and stakeholders from various institutions who are seeking robust examples of established WIL programs to implement changes in their education systems.

Semi-Structured Interviews: 50 one-on-one Interviews

In this case study, I have conducted 50 one-on-one semi-structured interviews (SSI) with Faculty of Arts undergraduates from the University of Waterloo to understand their perspectives of work-integrated learning programs and its potential implications on labour market outcomes. Interviewing is conceptualized as the conversational process of collecting data that represents the dialogical nature of human beings which supports the methodological goal of this project—acquiring data through conversations. As Brinkman (2013) pointed out, an interview is literally an inter-view, implying that it is an interexchange of views between two people that share a common interest on a subject matter, in which the interviewee (participant) provides information by answering the questions of the interviewer (researcher). In line with this premise, by conducting interviews, I was able to provide an opportunity to my participants to share their views on the matter of WIL programs.

In general, interviews as a qualitative research tool are “empirically and intuitively appealing” because it offers the flexibility to formulate questions that can be expanded as the project evolves if necessary (Aurini, Health, & Howells, 2021, p. 118). However, there are different types of interviews such as unstructured, narrative, semi-structured, and structured. The rationale for conducting semi-structured interviews for this case study is that it allowed me to engage with my participants in two-way communication that is focused, conversational, and follows topical trajectories (Kallio et al., 2016). The focused and conversational aspects of the semi-structured interviews assisted me to ask probing questions to follow-up, direct the trajectory of the conversation to align with the research objectives and dive deeper into relevant topics.

Moreover, due to the standardized nature of semi-structured interviews, I asked the participants a series of predetermined questions which encouraged them to speak about the important matters explored in this case study. This technique was useful for thematic inquiries (Aurini, Health, & Howells, 2021), such as the exposure and awareness levels of WIL programs, the benefits and limitations of WIL programs, the common transferable soft-skills that Arts students have developed and/or expect to develop through WIL programs, and the policies and practices regarding WIL that Arts students recommend to post-secondary institutions. The predetermined questions were also open-ended in order to motivate participants to provide detailed information and greater insights of their perceptions and experiences, as well as to give them the freedom to speak as per their comfort level (Turner, 2010). Therefore, considering the need to understand the viewpoints of Arts students thoroughly, a qualitative case study involving semi-structured interviews has well supported the ability of participants to discuss their thoughts and share their opinions.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Methodological Considerations

Although semi-structured interviews provide a degree of freedom to participants while allowing room for systematic comparison of participants' responses (Aurini, Health, & Howells, 2021), there are a few methodological considerations that a researcher should reflect on before choosing this type of qualitative data collection technique. For instance, the open-ended aspect of the questions may result in the participants going off-topic during the interview. To keep the participants focused on the relevant issues of this project, I have strategically directed the conversations towards the subject matter by asking probing questions, rewording the questions, and/or going back to the question at a later time when it fits the conversation.

Like any other type of interviews, a critical challenge of semi-structured interviews is that participants may provide socially desirable answers that are conventional in nature which can hinder the accuracy of the research findings (Krumpal, 2013). Participants may also alter their answers due to the alertness of being studied, known as the 'Hawthorne effect,' though it is more common in research involving observations (McCambridge et al., 2014). Although there is no way to entirely eliminate these challenges in a research study, the impact can be mitigated if the researcher is equipped to navigate the different layers of self-awareness by being reflective and mindful throughout the interviewing process (Luttrell, 2019), which is precisely what I have done. In addition, throughout the interview process, I have also ensured that I do not provide any verbal or non-verbal cues that may depict my perceptions regarding the matter of inquiry since the goal is to learn the participants' perspectives, not provide my own.

Another challenge of qualitative interviews including semi-structured interviews is that participants may also feel inhibited when asked questions that they consider sensitive or personal (Krumpal, 2013). To make participants feel comfortable, I have emailed them a letter of

information (LOI) to explicitly mention that answering the questions is completely voluntary, meaning that they can skip questions or completely exit the interview at any point if they feel uncomfortable (see *Appendix B*). The LOI also explains that the interview responses will be kept confidential at all times, and the data will be de-identified to keep the responses anonymous in research reports and publications. To confirm that participants understood their rights and freedom, I have reiterated this information prior to starting the interview (see 4.3 *Ethical Considerations* and 5.2: *Interview Protocol*).

4.3 Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the University of Waterloo research guidelines, an ethics proposal was submitted to the Office of Research Ethics (ORE) for review which outlined all the stages of this research project involving human participants. As part of the ethics proposal, I have also submitted the TCPS 2: CORE-2022 (Course on Research Ethics) certificate after completing the nine modules and a knowledge consolidation exercise that explained the risks and benefits associated with my research study and the relevance of informed consent form. The modules also prepared me to address issues related to fairness, equity, privacy, confidentiality, and conflicts of interest. After receiving full clearance by ORE at the University of Waterloo on September 2nd, 2022, the recruitment and data collection procedures began as the ethics clearance ensured that the safety and welfare of human participants are adequately protected and that my research study complies with Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

From a broad perspective, the central ethical consideration in this research project was the confidentiality of the participants. Professional or personal repercussions could have occurred if the collected data was not kept confidential using the necessary measures, especially in situations where participants shared opinions that do not align with the current institutional policies and

educational practices at the University of Waterloo. To avoid such repercussions, after the completion of each interview, identifying information were separated from participants through the process of pseudonymization which is a method of assigning a fictitious name to participants in order to retain their confidentiality (Heaton, 2021). After the process of pseudonymization, the participants' responses became anonymized, and any reference to their specific responses has been associated with their pseudonym. In addition to this procedure, having a diverse sample of 50 participants consisting of co-op and non co-op students from numerous different departments within the Faculty of Arts also reduced the possibility of identifying responses. The de-identified responses attached to pseudonyms have been used in this case study and will be used in future publications that emerge out of this project.

To further ensure anonymity and confidentiality, I have used a master spreadsheet which was the only location where the 50 participants' identifying information was kept. The master spreadsheet was stored in a secured Dropbox folder, and it was strictly accessible by me and my primary research supervisor, Dr. Janice Aurini. It is also important to note that Dr. Aurini and I both have password-protected laptops, so no other individual was able to access the master spreadsheet at any point of this research project. The sole purpose of the master spreadsheet was to be able to remove participants' responses if they chose to withdraw from the study before the completion of this thesis. Since this project has been completed, the master list has been permanently deleted (see 5.3: *Data Storage and Privacy*).

To maintain transparency, I have also emailed my participants an information letter and consent form that detailed the confidentiality and anonymity procedures which were taken throughout this project. Prior to each interview, I have also briefly reminded my participants about the confidentiality and anonymity factors to ensure that they are aware of how their responses will be recorded, stored, and used in this research project. This step not only served the purpose of

following the ethical standards, but it also encouraged the participants to freely share their perspectives and experiences of WIL programs. Consequently, this increased the creditability and trustworthiness of the data collected through the interviews.

CHAPTER 4:
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH APPROACH & DESIGN

Chapter 4 began with a broad overview of philosophical worldviews, followed by the rationale for applying interpretivism and social constructionism viewpoints in this thesis project. Afterward, a detailed justification for choosing the qualitative approach was provided which is to understand the viewpoints of Arts students in regard to the relationship between work-integrated learning and its potential implications of labour market outcomes post-graduation. This was possible through a qualitative approach which produced descriptive data that showcased the various perceptions of Arts students that cannot be quantified or analyzed statistically. In particular, a case study of the world's largest co-op institution, the University of Waterloo (UW) was used as UW is a strong exemplar of WIL programs on both national and global scales (BHER, 2015; University of Waterloo, 2023a). In this case study, 50 one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted which helped me to engage with my participants in two-way communication that is focused, conversational, and follows topical trajectories while giving them flexibility to share their experiences and perspectives as per their comfort level. This chapter also provided detailed information on the methodological considerations of a case study, semi-structured interviews, as well as ethical considerations of this research project.

CHAPTER 5: DATA COLLECTION

5.1 Sampling and Recruitment

Sample Population

For this case study, the target population was 4th-year undergraduate students—from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo (UW)—who plan to enter the labour market within 6 months of graduation irrespective of whether they are in co-op or non co-op streams. Since this is a case study on Arts students' perceptions of the relationship between work-integrated learning and its potential implications on labour market outcomes, selecting 4th-year Arts undergraduates from UW who are planning to enter the job market post-graduation has been the logical decision as they are going to be experiencing the school-to-work transition sooner than those who are in their 1st, 2nd or 3rd year of schooling. Thus, the topics explored in this case study are more likely to have higher relevance for 4th-years Arts undergraduates. Most importantly, selecting a target population of both co-op and non co-op students has not only been an inclusive choice but it also served the purpose of this case study as I was able to compare and contrast the perspectives of these two groups of Arts students.

Sample Size – 50 Participants

Given the scope, time, and feasibility of a case study of this nature, a sample size of approximately 20-30 participants would have been adequate (Small, 2009). However, to ensure a higher level of creditability and trustworthiness of the qualitative interview data (Creswell & Miller, 2000), I have purposefully selected the sample size to be 50 (see **Table 2: Participant List** below). It is important to note that was no exclusion criteria based on any identity markers such as race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other factors as these do not correspond with the research objectives of this project.

Table 2: Participant List with Co-op Designation and Fields of Study[1]

Pseudonym	Field of Study (Major/Minor) [2]	Program Type	Interview Date
1. Audrey	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	September 27th, 2022
2. Brian	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	September 27th, 2022
3. Ciara	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	October 5th, 2022
4. Dana	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	September 27th, 2022
5. Jasmine	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 6th, 2022
6. Julia	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 11th, 2022
7. Jay	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 5th, 2022
8. Krystal	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 9th, 2022
9. Lucy	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 10th, 2022
10. Maya	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	October 8th, 2022
11. Nora	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 9th, 2022
12. Rachel	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 2nd, 2022
13. Savana	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	October 25th, 2022
14. Sophia	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 8th, 2022
15. Wilma	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	October 2nd, 2022
16. Yuvik	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 5th, 2022
17. Yara	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	November 2nd, 2022
18. Yasmin	Accounting & Financial Management	Co-op	October 4th, 2022
19. Avery	Business & Computer Science	Co-op	October 7th, 2022
20. Adam	Computing & Financial Management	Co-op	October 2nd, 2022
21. Quincy	Economics	Co-op	September 28th, 2022
22. Spencer	Economics	Co-op	September 29th, 2022
23. Aria	Economics	Co-op	November 6th, 2022
24. Veronica	Economics	Co-op	November 5th, 2022
25. Daisy	English, Entrepreneurship, and Psychology	Co-op	October 7th, 2022
26. Bella	Global Business & Digital Arts	Co-op	November 6th, 2022
27. Janet	Global Business & Digital Arts	Co-op	October 5th, 2022

28. Wendy	Global Business & Digital Arts	Co-op	September 29th, 2022
29. Ruby	History	Co-op	September 28th, 2022
30. Stella	History & Psychology	Co-op	November 4th, 2022
31. Taylor	History & Psychology	Co-op	November 8th, 2022
32. Austin	International Relations & Political Science	Co-op	October 2nd, 2022
33. Eliza	Music & Psychology	Co-op	November 8th, 2022
34. Opal	Philosophy & Religious Studies	Co-op	October 11th, 2022
35. Krivon	Psychology	Co-op	September 29th, 2022
36. Pamela	Psychology	Co-op	September 28th, 2022
37. Abigail	Psychology & Human Resource Management	Co-op	November 4th, 2022
38. Rebecca	Psychology & Human Resource Management	Co-op	September 29th, 2022
39. Camille	Psychology & Legal Studies	Co-op	November 9th, 2022
40. Melody	Psychology & Sexuality, Marriage and Family Studies	Co-op	September 29th, 2022
41. Mia	Social Development Studies	Co-op	November 9th, 2022
42. Blake	Sociology & Legal Studies	Co-op	September 28th, 2022
43. Amelia	Economics	Non co-op	October 20th, 2022
44. Hazel	German & Applied Language Studies	Non co-op	September 28th, 2022
45. Eden	History, Entrepreneurship, & Public Policy	Non co-op	October 4th, 2022
46. Sarah	History & German Studies	Non co-op	October 4th, 2022
47. Amara	Legal Studies & Political Science	Non co-op	November 5th, 2022
48. Rose	Psychology	Non co-op	November 6th, 2022
49. Mason	Sociology	Non co-op	October 6th, 2022
50. Matilda	Sociology & Social Development Studies	Non co-op	November 4th, 2022

[1]To make Table 2 easily interpretable, the *Participant List* has been arranged by co-op and non co-op streams. The participants whose post-secondary education includes work-integrated learning experience (co-op) are displayed from 1 to 42 (N = 42) while their counterparts are displayed from 43 to 50 (N = 8).

[2]Within the co-op and non co-op categories, the *Participant List* has been arranged alphabetically according to students' field of study (major/minor). Within each field of study, the pseudonyms have been also arranged alphabetically (N=50).

Recruitment Procedure

To recruit the desired sample size of 50 participants from the target population, an email was sent to all 4th-year undergraduate students from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo by the Office of the Registrar on my behalf. The recruitment email (see *Appendix C*) included a Letter of Information (LOI) and a consent form (see *Appendix B*) that provided a project overview, outlined the purpose of the study, informed participants about their rights, the possible benefits of this project, and the potential risks associated with participation. The LOI also included information on privacy, data retention, and storage as well as how confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained throughout the project. The rationale for providing a comprehensive LOI and consent form was to ensure that participants are well-informed about the study prior to making a decision to participate (Roache, 2014).

A key factor to note is that the LOI also provided information on who qualifies as an eligible participant such as a 4th-year undergraduate Arts student at UW who plans to enter the labour market within 6 months of graduation. Only those who fit this eligibility criteria were requested to email me if interested in participating in this case study. After receiving the LOI and consent form, 54 participants from the target population demonstrated interest by filling out their consent form, checking all the boxes, and emailing it to me—this is the process of recruiting through *active consent* which further ensured that participants understood the risks and potential advantages associated with their involvement in this project and that the their participation is voluntary (Courser et al, 2009). Since my desired sample size was 50, the recruitment procedure ended upon reaching this number. After receiving the consent form and ensuring that it is completed successfully by eligible participants, an interview was scheduled at a preferred time slot.

5.2 Interview Protocol and Guide

Before Interview

The interview period began on September 27th, 2022 and ended on November 11th, 2022. During this period, a total of 50 participants were interviewed. Prior to each interview, the Letter of Information (LOI) and consent form (see both on *Appendix B*) were provided to participants which they were required to review before emailing me a signed copy as proof of consent to participate in this case study. It is important to note that all participants were required to fill out the consent form including those who checked off verbal consent as their preferred method of providing consent. Three days preceding the scheduled interview, participants also received an automatic reminder email (see *Appendix D)* about the interview date, time, and virtual location information (e.g., Zoom meeting ID, password, and link). A few participants emailed questions about the project which were answered in detail prior to their interview. Most importantly, to verify that the eligibility criteria[1] has been met, all participants were asked to confirm their eligibility before the interview began.

During Interview

Each interview began virtually on the Zoom platform with a brief introduction of myself as the researcher, followed by an overview of the Letter of Information (LOI) and consent form in order to remind participants about the purpose of the study, the type of questions that they can expect, and the ethical rights that they have (e.g., participation in this project is entirely voluntary). Before pressing the record button, participants were also given an opportunity to ask questions if

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[1] **Eligibility criteria:** A 4th-year undergraduate student from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo who plans to enter the labour market (e.g., find any type of paid work) within 6 months of graduation.

they had any. For those who opted to verbal consent, their consent was also taken prior to recording the interview and asking any interview questions.

While I kept my camera on during the interviews, some of the participants chose to keep their camera off. Participants were neither encouraged nor discouraged to keep their camera on during the interview as it was entirely dependent on their personal preference and comfort level. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 40 – 50 minutes, with the shortest one being 34 minutes and the longest was 61 minutes. Despite having a standardized set of interview questions (see *Appendix A*), the variation in duration of the interview was simply due to certain participants choosing to provide more thorough responses than others. None of the participants skipped any question or exited the interview. Hand-written notes were taken during the interview to write memos and to record non-verbal gestures that appeared to be relevant to contextualize the interview data.

After Interview

At the end of each interview, before pressing the 'stop' recording button, participants were asked if they would like to share anything that has not been covered in the interview (see *Appendix A*). As a response to this question, a few participants elaborated on their previous answers while others provided new insights. After the completion of each interview, within the same day, the audio recording was downloaded from my Zoom account to my password-protected laptop and uploaded to Otter.ai for transcription[1]. Once the transcripts were anonymized with pseudonyms, I added the hand-written notes from the interviews where applicable. Subsequently, a 'Thank You' email (see *Appendix E*) was sent to the participant within 24 to 48 hours after the interview. Along

[1]More information on data retention can be found in Chapter 5.3: *Data Storage and Privacy*

with the ‘Thank You’ email, an e-transfer of $15 remuneration was also sent to participants for their time and contributions towards my research project. Lastly, after every 5-10 interviews, the interview guide was revisited and modified based on interview memos to increase the clarity of the questions.

Interview Guide

The interview guide was divided into four different sections (see *Appendix A*). In the first section, questions about participants’ field of study and current program at the University of Waterloo (UW) were asked. This section also consisted of a wide range of questions regarding participants’ awareness, exposure, and existing knowledge of work-integrated learning (WIL) programs. The second section included questions regarding participants’ perceptions and experiences of WIL programs such as the relevance of WIL programs, key benefits and limitations of WIL programs, the advantages/disadvantages of doing theorical versus practice-based learning, and several other adjacent thematic inquiries were discussed. In this section, I also incorporated questions related to participants’ perceptions of the labour market to hear their opinions regarding the transferable skills that employers might seek, the key factors that may help graduates succeed in the workforce, the perceived challenges that graduates may face in the job market and whether these challenges are likely to vary between Arts versus non-Arts degree-holders.

The third section had a broad range of questions to gain Arts students’ perspectives on how well Canadian post-secondary institutions (in general) and at UW specifically prepare them for the job market, what are the available resources and services that can help students to develop the necessary soft-skills in post-secondary education, and whether these sources are catered to Arts programs. The fourth and final section included questions regarding the effective WIL-related

institutional policies and educational practices that are currently available at the University of Waterloo as well as the changes in policies/practices that participants would like to recommend to UW and other post-secondary institutions. This section also gave participants an opportunity to provide advice and suggestions for Arts students which can help them to better prepare themselves for the labour market. Overall, although the interview guide was divided up into four sections, I went back and forth in a few of them due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews.

5.3 Data Storage and Privacy

In accordance with the guidelines of Office of the Research Ethics (ORE) at the University of Waterloo, the following step-by-step procedures were taken to store the interview data and to protect the privacy of the participants in this research project:

Step 1: After the completion of each interview on the Zoom platform, only the audio version of the interview recording was downloaded to my password-protected laptop. Once the file was successfully downloaded to my laptop, it was immediately deleted from the Zoom account.

Step 2: Each audio recording was uploaded from my laptop to the research project Dropbox which was only accessible by me and my research supervisor, Dr. Janice Aurini. Both of us are the sole users of our respective password-protected laptops and Dropbox.

Step 3: From my laptop, the audio recording of each interview was also uploaded to my Otter.ai account for transcription purposes. This account is only accessible by me; the account credentials were not shared with other individuals at any point of this research project.

Step 4: After the transcription of each interview on Otter.ai, the real names of the participants were replaced with fictitious names as part of the pseudonymization process. The de-identified transcripts were cross-checked with audio recordings to ensure accuracy, and then downloaded to my laptop before deleting them from Otter.ai account. As part of the ethics clearance, I have

received permission to store the de-identified data for a maximum of 7 years after the completion of the interviews.

Step 5: Upon completion of steps 2, 3, and 4, the audio recordings were permanently deleted from my laptop. Since this thesis project has been completed, the recordings have been deleted from the Dropbox and Otter.ai account as well. The recordings are no longer available on any platforms.

Step 6: A master spreadsheet in Excel format was used in this project which was the only location where the participants' identifying information was kept. The master spreadsheet was stored in the secured research project Dropbox folder which was exclusively accessible to me and my research supervisor, Dr. Aurini. The sole purpose of the master spreadsheet was to be able to remove participants' responses if they chose to withdraw from the study before the completion of the thesis. Since this project has now been completed, the master list has been permanently deleted.

5.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Transcription

The data analysis process began with uploading the interview audio recordings from my password-protected laptop to Otter.ai which is an artificial intelligence software that transforms voice conversations into transcriptions (McCue, 2023). This process of transcription produced a total of 542 pages of written text from the 50 one-on-one interviews. Following the transcription of all the interviews on Otter.ai, I anonymized the transcripts through the process of pseudonymization which involved assigning a fictitious name to each participant on a random basis (Heaton, 2021). In essence, this process of generating the transcripts was the first yet critical step of the data analysis. As researcher Stuckey (2014) asserted, "the accuracy of the transcription plays a role in determining the accuracy of the data that are analyzed and with what degree of

dependability" (p. 6). To ensure accuracy, after anonymizing the transcripts, each of them was read in conjunction with the audio file to verify whether the interview responses were transcribed precisely by Otter.ai. For words or phrases that were not transcribed accurately, modifications were made accordingly to represent the actual conversations. After the production of the transcriptions, the de-identified transcripts were exported to my password-protected laptop as a Microsoft Word document.

Pre-coding

Following the transcription process, the next step of the data analysis was coding which is the procedure of organizing, identifying, and labeling data thematically. I began this process by uploading the de-identified transcripts to NVivo which is a qualitative data management software that assists with handling data systematically (Zamawe, 2015). My case study involved three rounds of coding: pre-coding, first cycle of coding, and second cycle of coding (Aurini, Health, & Howells, 2021), and a final round of revision of the second cycle of coding. During the pre-coding stage, a preliminary coding scheme was developed to consider the broad thematic areas in the responses that address my research questions such as "Perceptions of WIL programs," "Benefits of WIL programs," "Challenges of WIL programs," and "Policies/Practices in WIL programs." I used these broad thematic areas to organize the chapters of my results and discussion sections (see Chapter 6 - 9). After the pre-coding, the first cycle of coding took place to arrange the data in a more manageable way. To achieve this goal, the first cycle of coding involved identifying reoccurring trends and patterns which are descriptive in nature as well as synthesizing the central characteristics of the findings.

First Cycle of Coding

In the first cycle of coding, each interview transcript was treated as a case and classified accordingly. For example, all the co-op cases were distinguished from the non co-op cases for a comparative analysis. Within the realm of coding in qualitative research, there are two broad approaches that are used: *inductive* and *deductive*. While the inductive approach is used in research projects with little to no existing literature on a topic and moves the specific observations to a general theory, the deductive approach is the opposite and is used to test theoretical perspectives (Feredy & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In my case study, since there is a lack of Canadian literature on Arts students' perceptions of work-integrated learning programs, I used an inductive, open-coding method to come up with codes based on emerging themes from the data. The inductive, open-coding approach involved identification of overarching themes through careful reading which is a form of "pattern recognition" (Feredy & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82), and assigning codes to selected texts from the data in order to arrange them thematically (Aurini, Health, & Howells, 2021). This process of pattern recognition was guided by the research questions of my case study and the interview questions as well. For example, the themes "insufficient exposure and awareness levels," "low departmental and faculty support," and "mismatch between program and work" came up during thematic analysis which is pertinent to the third research question of my project (RQ3) and to the interview guide (see *Appendix A*). By coding in this manner, it ensured that the process would eventually lead to findings that are directly applicable to the overall inquiry of my case study. The first round of coding also involved incorporating interview notes and memos which helped me to recall important areas of exploration and enhance the contextual understanding of the data. At the end of the first cycle of coding, a codebook was developed based on the dominating themes that emerged.

Second Cycle of Coding

Although the first round of coding produced a codebook consisting of a set of descriptive codes, this initial round of open-coding required revision, reorganization, and reinterpretation, and thus, a second cycle of coding which is more focused took place to "compare and contrast emerging propositions with established concepts, theories, and findings" (Aurini, Health, & Howells, 2021, p. 254). During the second phase of coding, I assessed the descriptive codes and formed analytical links and thematic associations which had a more direct connection to the research questions and the three leading theories in work-integrated learning literature which grounded my case study (human capital theory, credentialism, and situated learning theory). During this second cycle of coding, I have also modified the existing descriptive codes such as "mismatched between program and work" became "lack of field-specific WIL placements." In this second cycle, some of the grandparent, parent, and grandchild nodes were also modified, meaning that various different sub-codes were created within each broad code that shared thematic relationships.

Final Round of Revision

The final round of revision involved carefully evaluating the second cycle of coding to ensure that it addresses the research questions. Since the second round of coding produced about several direct quotes for each theme. The goal of the final round was to pick the top one to three direct quotes that address the research questions more closely. The holistic purpose of the coding framework (pre-coding to final round of revision) was "to understand the participant's situation from his or her point of view" (van den Hoonaard, 2012, p. 162), in this case, the participants' perceptions of the work-integrated learning and its potential implications on labour market outcomes. By conducting various cycles of coding, it was possible to address the research

questions while ensuring a high level of credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

CHAPTER 5:
SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTION

Chapter 5 outlined the data collection methods and provided information on the target population, sample size, recruitment processes, interview protocol, interview guide, participant list, data storage and privacy steps, as well as data analysis procedures including different cycles of coding. Since this is a case study on Arts students' perceptions of the relationship between work-integrated learning and its potential implications on labour market outcomes, selecting 4th-year Arts undergraduates from UW who are planning to enter the job market within 6 months of graduation has been the ideal choice as they are going to be experiencing the school-to-work transition sooner than 1st, 2nd or 3rd-year undergraduates. To ensure a high level of creditability and trustworthiness of the qualitative interview data, I have purposefully decided to set the desired sample size at 50 participants which fell within the scope of this project. After receiving ethics clearance, the Registrar's Office at the University of Waterloo sent a recruitment email to my target population (all Faculty of Arts students at UW) on my behalf, and participants responded to me via active consent (e.g., emailing me a signed copy of consent form). The steps of the semi-structured interview (before, during, and after) and the questions were strategically planned to ensure a high level of accuracy and consistency. After collecting the interview data, strict storage and privacy protocols were followed to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Only the de-identified data (pseudonymized names) have been used in this research project and will be used in future publications as well. The data was coded in a scaffolding manner in which each step built on top of the previous one (pre-coding, first cycle, second cycle, and final round of revision), and the findings have been presented below in the following chapters 6 to 10.

CHAPTER 6: PERCEPTIONS OF WIL

Research Question (RQ1)

RQ1: *How do Faculty of Arts students perceive the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and labour market outcomes post-graduation?*

6.1 Results: Key Findings

In this case study, to explore the perspectives of Arts students regarding the relationship between work-integrated learning and its potential implications on labour market outcomes post-graduation, a total of 50 interviews were conducted with 4th-year undergraduates who are from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo and who are planning to enter the workforce within 0 to 6 months of graduation. Within this group of students, 42 were from the co-op stream while 8 were from non co-op programs. After systematic coding and analysis of the interview data of all 50 participants using the NVivo software, it was discovered that both groups of participants perceive work-integrated learning (WIL) programs to have a positive impact on labour market outcomes post-graduation, emphasizing that WIL programs increase the chance of labour market success. More precisely, 48 out of the 50 students which is 96% of the participants consider WIL to be relevant regardless of their field of study. The remaining two participants, one from co-op and one from non co-op program, stated that the relevance of WIL is dependent on what type of job is being pursued in the labour market as some occupations may not require work experience. To support this argument, the two participants provided a list of examples of professions in which WIL may not play a critical role such as social media influencers, actors, musicians, dancers, and entrepreneurs.

Although Arts students in general perceive a positive association between WIL experience and labour market success, there were differences in how co-op versus non co-op students interpret the concept of work-integrated learning due to the variations in their level of exposure to WIL programs, with the former group having higher awareness and understanding of WIL from their co-op placements. Aside from the concrete responses of students, the differences in participation rate between co-op and non co-op students in this case study on WIL itself is an evidence that the former group has a higher level of knowledge regarding WIL than the latter group. There were also variations in how Arts students from different fields of study perceive the value of WIL experiences. For example, students who are in non-conventional Arts programs such as Accounting, Finance, and Economics consider the relevance of WIL to be same or similar in all fields. In contrast, students from traditional Arts programs such as Sociology, Psychology, and History predict that WIL experiences are likely to benefit Arts graduates more as they tend to experience greater barriers when entering the labour market compared to non-Arts graduates. Despite these variations in perspectives among students from different fields of study within the Faculty of Arts, the majority of students from all programs have stated that there is a growing soft-skills gap between higher education and employment which can be bridged through participation in work-integrated learning programs as it can help them develop the necessary skills for the job market. This viewpoint is consistent with human capital theorists as well as situated learning theorists who perceive WIL programs to be highly beneficial for labour market success, unlike credential theorists who consider it as a mere supplementary micro-credential that emerged as a by-product of educational expansion to satisfy the demands of employers rather than a functional necessity (Ashcroft et al., 2021; Bouwer, Venketsamy, & Bipath, 2021; Davies & Guppy, 2010; Walters, 2004).

6.2 Co-op vs Non Co-op Students' Perceptions of WIL

The Arts students in this case study, from both co-op and non co-op streams, have stated that they perceive a strong association between work-integrated learning programs and labour market success based on their existing knowledge of WIL programs. When probed about this knowledge, Krystal, a 4th-year Arts co-op student from Accounting and Financial Management (AFM) program mentioned that "employers in the 21st century are looking for some type of work experience… graduates can easily display it [work experience] on their resume if they have participated in WIL during their post-secondary studies." This suggests that students are aware of current labour market demands and the growing need acquiring work experience during post-secondary education in order to prepare themselves for the competitive workforce after graduation. Another co-op student Wendy who is pursuing Global Business and Digital Arts shared the same perceptions as Krystal despite being from a different field of study. For instance, Wendy explained the importance of gaining work experience from WIL programs, especially during undergraduate years as she is well-aware of the difficulty of finding a job post-graduation for BA degree holders compared to Master or PhD graduates based on her research for a term paper in one of her courses. Wendy said, "I think it's extremely important to gain work experience from WIL in undergrad more than MBA, MA, MSc, PhD or other higher-level degrees because it's, it's harder to get a job with a BA degree since everyone nowadays have it." Wendy's perception is consistent with Statistics Canada's (2023) data on national graduates which shows that the unemployment rate gets lower as the level of education gets higher. The latter part of Wendy's statement where she mentioned that "everyone nowadays has it [a BA degree]" aligns with the concept of credential inflation—the tendency to require an increasing level of educational qualifications for a specific

job that can be done with lesser degrees, diplomas, or certifications—a concern raised by credential theorists (Davies & Guppy, 2010).[1]

Similar to the co-op students, many non co-op students also recognized the importance of WIL programs in terms of finding employment post-graduation. A non co-op student Rose, who is in the Psychology program stated that "WIL is essential in terms of developing transferable skills which can be very useful when you try to find that first full time job after graduation." Rose's viewpoints are parallel to findings from institutional reports by RBC Career Development Foundation (2016) and Business and Higher Education Roundtable (2015). These reports indicated that without adequate transferable skills, employers are reluctant to hire new graduates and comfortably rely on them as it can hinder the performance level of their organization. Moreover, hiring inexperienced graduates can lead to investing more time and funds in training facilities, hosting workshops, and preparing newcomers. These investments can increase the cost of hiring which causes employers to be risk-averse when selecting new graduates, especially because there is a limited number of available entry-level jobs in the current labour market (RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016). Like Rose, another non co-op student Hazel who is pursuing German and Applied Language majors mentioned that WIL programs can "help build professional networks which can be specifically helpful for language, gender studies, or other non-popular majors where it's harder to find a job." Through this comment, Rose is implying that WIL programs have a heightened importance in fields of study where jobs are relatively low because WIL can help students build connections with potential employers who can provide access to employment opportunities.

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[1]For more information on the perspectives of credential theorists, see Chapter 3.2: *Credentialism*.

Furthermore, in relation to the importance of work-integrated learning programs on labour market outcomes, when participants were asked whether they consider work-integrated learning programs to be relevant in terms of finding employment post-graduation, both co-op and non co-op students detailed that it is highly relevant in their perspectives. The common reasons that students outlined when commenting on the relevance of WIL are gathering work experience, developing transferable skills, resume-building, showcasing competencies to employers, lowering student debt, and gaining financial stability sooner. Two examples have been presented below that represent students' perceptions of the relevance of WIL and its potential implications on labour market outcomes post-graduation.

Response from a Co-op student:

> "I definitely consider work-integrated learning to be very relevant, like a 10 out of 10 or maybe even 11. In fact I only chose this institution [University of Waterloo] because it offers co-op. And I am so happy I did it, it was the best decision of my life because it's like you get to put something down on your resume that looks good. And it's like, I guess a piece of evidence for companies, or employers, or others, like an assurance that you have the minimum skills needed to perform basic jobs at least. It makes your life a lot easier when you graduate and try, and try to get that full time job. You also get paid and you can pay off your student loans sooner and reach financial stability sooner." (Aria)

Response from a Non Co-op student:

> "It's extremely important, because without the experience, it would be a tough battle in the job market to get a job which is something I think I am going to face most likely because my program doesn't really have co-op option, or maybe I just don't know…I think without experience, you're for sure at a disadvantage because if you want to get a position where it's very competitive, you really need a co-op placement or some sort of job experience to make yourself stand out from other graduates, like after you graduate." (Eden)

As quoted above, when participants were asked to share their perspectives on the importance of WIL programs in terms of finding a job post-graduation, both co-op and non co-op students mentioned that they consider WIL to be "very relevant" (Aria) and "extremely important" (Eden) as WIL can demonstrate to employers that they have the required transferable skills as well

as practical experience to perform basic tasks in the workplace. Similar to Aria who stated that WIL can be "a piece of evidence," many other students echoed corresponding viewpoints and indicated that WIL can be advantageous. This is because WIL can make new graduates stand out among a pool of candidates with common post-secondary degrees or diplomas, as per Arts students. A few students also pointed out that irrespective of whether the work experience from WIL is related to their field or not, it still places co-op students at a higher position post-graduation compared to those who do not have any work experience to present to employers. These perceptions of Arts students are coherent with recent quantitative literature that identified a positive correlation between WIL programs and labour market outcomes regardless of the field of study (Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020; Martin & Rouleau, 2020).

Despite both co-op and non co-op students having similar perceptions on the relevance of WIL programs and its potential impact on labour market success, there were variations in understanding of the concept of WIL due to the level of exposure and experience between the two groups. While co-op students were accustomed to the various types of WIL programs and its application processes, non co-op students were not as familiar with the different kinds of WIL opportunities offered in post-secondary education. For example, when I asked students whether they had any knowledge about work-integrated learning programs prior to enrolling in their current institution (University of Waterloo), the majority of non co-op students answered that they had "limited" knowledge or a "lack" of awareness. Afterward, when I asked students what do they know about work-integrated learning programs after four years of being in post-secondary education that they did not know before, some of the non co-op students referred to co-op as their point of reference, whereas the co-op students were able to list a wide range of WIL programs such as field work, clinical placements, apprenticeships, and internships.

Another factor to note is that when students were asked questions about the role of WIL programs in school-to-work transitions, co-op students expressed excitement and confidence in their responses [documented in interview notes] as they consider themselves being at an advantageous position for having WIL experience, however, the non co-op students voiced concerns about the outcomes of the labour market post-graduation due to not having any work experience. For example, Matilda, a non co-op student who is majoring Sociology and Social Development studies stated the following:

> "…Okay, so now I regret not choosing the co-op option because I definitely think work-integrated learning puts people at an advantage when they try to find work after completing education. Because then you have a solid chance while you're applying for jobs, as opposed to people who don't have it." (Matilda)

Based on Matilda's response, it is clear that she is concerned about her potential job-hunting experience in the labour market post-graduation due to not participating in WIL programs and having no work experience—a concern that a few of the non co-op students also mentioned. In addition, when students were asked whether co-op or non co-op students have a higher chance of finding employment after graduation keeping all other factors the same, all 50 participants have responded that co-op students have a higher chance due to having work experience which is "highly appealing" (Wilma) and "very attractive" (Mason) to employers. Therefore, based on the findings from this case study, it can be concluded that despite the variations in the level of exposure, awareness, and experience in WIL programs, both co-op and non co-op students perceive a positive association between participation in WIL programs and labour market outcomes post-graduation.

6.3 The Perceived Value of WIL in Arts vs non-Arts Programs

As displayed in Table 2 (Participant List) in Chapter 5.1: *Sampling and Recruitment*, among the 50 Faculty of Arts undergraduates from the University of Waterloo who participated in this case study, 25 of them are majoring Accounting and Financial Management, Computing and Financial Management, or Economics which fall under the blurred line of 'Arts' and 'Science.' As there is no business school at the University of Waterloo, this institution has categorized these fields of study as 'Arts,' however, the majority of post-secondary institutions across Ontario classify these disciplines under the Faculty of Commerce, Business, or Science. In recent years, it has become a controversial debate among contemporary thinkers whether Accounting, Finance, Economics, and related departments should be part of the Faculty of Arts or Sciences. Most economists and quantitative analysts are likely to classify these fields under the Faculty of Commerce, Business, or Science due to its roots being embedded in Mathematics, Statistics, and Sciences, while qualitative researchers may consider these disciplines as 'Arts' because these fields involve exploring social phenomenon and processes related to human behaviours and actions (Khan, 2021; Pettinger, 2016).

In this case study, when participants were questioned whether the value of work-integrated leaning programs vary for Arts versus non-Arts degree-holders in the labour market, more than half of the students who are pursuing Accounting, Finance, and Economics stated that the value of WIL is the same or similar in Arts compared to non-Arts programs, whereas those who are from conventional Arts disciplines such as Sociology, Psychology, and History mentioned that the value of WIL is higher in Arts programs. Students from the latter group stated this based on the presumption that employers prefer non-Arts degree, which is why they perceive that having work

experience from WIL programs can make them appear more marketable in the eyes of employers. As such, students claim participating in WIL has a higher value for Arts students because it can help them enhance their degree. To illustrate this point with examples, during the interview when students were asked whether the value of WIL programs differ for Arts versus non-Arts programs, students provided the following responses:

Responses of students from Accounting, Finance, and/or Economics majors:

> "I think it's the same like, you know, in our program, AFM [Accounting and Financial Management], Arts or not, the value of work-integrated learning doesn't change. It's the work and co-op experiences that counts. I think Waterloo categorizes us as Art students, but like, in like, some universities they don't put AFM as Arts. I don't think it matters whether, if AFM, if we are Arts or not because like we are doing co-op and interacting with employers, gaining skills, we are still learning new things so even if we are Arts it does not matter, the value of co-op experiences should still be the same. (Brian – Accounting & Financial Management)

> "No, I wouldn't say so. I think the value of WIL programs or co-op programs are similar for Arts, STEMs or other students. I think employers care about job experience for all students and all programs, especially skills that you can transfer from school to work, like transferable skills such as communication, teamwork skills, how to think critically and stuff." (Veronica – Economics)

Similar to Brian and Veronica, two other students who are majoring in Accounting, Finance, and/or Economics are well-aware of how the University of Waterloo categorizes these disciplines as 'Arts' unlike many other post-secondary institutions in Ontario. These students indicated that "it does not matter" whether they are categorized as Arts students or not as they think that employers will place a higher priority on their WIL experience and acquired skills. Similar to Veronica, other students from these disciplines also listed that leadership qualities, personality traits, teamwork, and communication skills are more important than the title of the degree. All of these attributes fall under the umbrella of soft skills. These perceptions of Arts students are consistent with contemporary sociological literature in which it is written that the historical focus on hard-skills alone is no longer sufficient for employers in today's dynamic job

market. The 21st century employers now place a greater emphasis on soft-skills as a result of the changing competitive battleground in which businesses are rapidly evolving and shifting their labour market perspectives (Dean & East, 2019; Washor, 2015).

Another factor to note is that students who are majoring Accounting, Finance, and/or Economics most likely consider themselves as "AFM students," "Finance students," or "Economics students" instead of "Arts students" as they kept referring to themselves by their departmental title or program name instead of their faculty designation. For example, Brian referred to himself as an AFM student in the above quote: "I think it's the same like, you know, in our program, AFM [Accounting and Financial Management], Arts or not, the value of work-integrated learning doesn't change." As depicted by this quotation, Brian placed himself within the AFM program instead of Faculty of Arts while discussing the value of WIL in Arts versus non-Arts fields. Like Brian, many other Arts students who are majoring AFM categorized themselves as "AFM students" because they perhaps resonate more with their departmental title. On the other hand, Arts students who are majoring Sociology, Psychology, and/or History provided a different response when asked the same question of whether the value of WIL programs is the same for Arts and non-Arts programs. To represent the viewpoints of Arts students from Sociology, Psychology, and/or History majors, two quotations have been presented below.

Responses of students from Sociology, Psychology, and/or History majors:

> Yes, yes, I would say so. I think if you are a Arts student, definitely do a co-op or any sort of WIL program so you can show employers that you got some experience, because you know there is this stereotype that people have in mind about, you know, what an engineer student is going to be like, what an Art student is going to be like, certainly, there's some judgment based on, you know, oh, this person is a science student, so they're going be really, really smart. Oh, this person is an Art student, they probably aren't very smart. But when you have some kind of work experience, at least you can show that you are also capable as engineer, math, science, or other fields. (Stella – History and Psychology)

> I think maybe there is, like I know there is a kind of stigma around Arts degrees, like, like people who have STEM degrees might be inherently seen as the intelligent students, or, like, better at jobs, like with Arts degrees, I feel like you are kind of undervalued. Not kind of, a lot actually. That's why you need to do co-op and different placements and get your hands on with work-integrated learning to increase your value in the job market in front of employers and managers. I based this on my experience, I've already told you about what I think about universities and even society and how I think most people favors STEM (Mason – Sociology)

As portrayed by the above quotations, many students from Sociology, Psychology, and History tend to associate a higher value of WIL programs for Arts students. This is because they perceive employers to be favouring non-Arts degrees due to "stereotypes" and "stigma" associated with Arts graduates such as the lack of intelligence or competencies. As Stella stated, "Oh, this person is a science student, so they're going be really, really smart. Oh, this person is an Art student, they probably aren't very smart." Stella's comment suggests that there may be a preconceived ideology in the labour market about students from different fields of study, with Arts degrees ranking lower in the prestige hierarchy. Mason also echoed Stella's statement by reiterating that "…people who have STEM degrees might be inherently seen as the intelligent students, or, like, better at jobs, like with Arts degrees, I feel like you are kind of undervalued. Not kind of, a lot actually." Although employers have not explicitly indicated their preference between Arts and non-Arts students in any surveys or interviews, research findings show that Arts students experience greater barriers in terms of finding a job in their field of study during their academic years (Yamamoto, 2014) as well as post-graduation upon entry into the workforce (Zeid et al., 2015).

In addition, the majority of students from Sociology, Psychology, and History programs in this case study consider that it is critically important to engage in WIL programs to gain experience and develop transferable skills in order to be able to "show employers that you got some

experience" (Stella) and "to increase your value in the job market" (Mason). Similar to the Arts students' perceptions from this case study, many researchers have suggested that WIL programs can potentially be an effective educational model to reverse the rising trends of unemployment rate among new graduates (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Martin & Rouleau, 2020). This is because WIL allows students to apply academic contents and theoretical concepts to practice-based tasks in the real-world. By merging traditional post-secondary education with contemporary work experience, WIL can better prepare new graduates for their entry into the labour market, resulting in a smoother transition from higher education to employment (Jackson & Collings, 2018).

6.4 The Perceived Gap between Higher Education and Employment

In this case study, irrespective of the co-op or non co-op status of Arts students, the majority of them (36 out of 50 students which is equivalent to 72% of the sample) stressed that there is a gap between how post-secondary institutions are preparing their students and what employers are seeking from new graduates. To describe this gap, many students have used adjectives such as "widening," "growing," and "increasing,"—these terms imply that students perceive the gap between education and employment to be on the rise, leading to a deeper concern among the participants who are in their 4th-year of study and will be entering the job market post-graduation. To illustrate with examples, when students were asked about whether there is a gap between higher education and employment, Amara, a co-op student who is majoring Legal Studies and Political Science stated the following:

> "I think there is a gap, a massive gap indeed. Because at the end of the day, employers are looking for practical workers, they want people who can run the ground, like hit the ground running, they want people who won't take three months of training, for example, they want people who can learn and integrate into the work environment faster. But university, especially like, in my program, I don't think I learned a lot of practical knowledge in class. What I learned is all theoretical. It's just theory, theory,

> and more theory. And some more theory. Although it's good to have theoretical knowledge, they don't teach you how to translate it into practical knowledge. So like, I knew why we are doing stuff but I wouldn't know how to implement it if I were go to work today." (Amara)

As Amara highlighted, "employers are looking for practical workers, they want people who can run the ground, like hit the ground running," emphasizing on the importance of practical skills. Like Amara, many students reiterated the same statement that applied skills gained from hands-on experiences are not only highly valued by employers, but these traits are also essential in order to conduct the basic tasks at any given job. Amara and a handful of students also pointed out how post-secondary institutions focus heavily on theories, yet they "don't teach you how to translate it [theorical analysis] into practical knowledge, resulting in the gap between higher education and employment. Another student Bella who is majoring Global Business and Digital Arts also mentioned that post-secondary institutions are not training students adequately for the adversities of the current labour market as quoted below:

> "Yeah, I don't think that universities are preparing students enough for how difficult it's going to be to get a job. I think they will send you emails and things saying, oh, there's resources that you can use if you want. But I think that the universities kind of make it sound like, oh, once you have your degree, you're going to get a job for sure…they make it seem like, you're going to get a job as long as you have the bachelor's degree. And I don't think they emphasize how important it is to have the co-op experience as well." (Bella)

As quoted above, Bella and a few other Arts students in this case study highlighted that although there are passive ways through which post-secondary institutions are preparing students such as by sending mass emails and having resources available on campus, there is a lack of active engagement from post-secondary institutions in terms of bridging the theory-practice gap. Bella also indicated that "universities kind of make it sound like, oh, once you have your degree, you're going to get a job for sure." Through this statement, Bella is indicating that there is a lack of practicality aspect in the expectations communicated to students regarding labour market

mechanisms and how the job-world operates.

The perceptions of Amara, Bella, and those who echoed similar concerns are consistent with contemporary researchers who speculated that the growing trends of unemployment rate among bachelor's degree holders may signal a detachment between how post-secondary institutions are preparing students and what employers are seeking from new graduates (Sarin, 2019; Washor, 2015). This speculation of researchers has been subtle in literature as there is no empirical evidence to draw a sound conclusion whether the primary reason behind the rise in unemployment rate is due to training gaps in higher education. Employers, however, have critiqued higher education for not preparing students adequately for the current labour market demands, emphasizing on the lack of transferable soft skills (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). Approximately a decade ago, organizations would hire for potential. However, there is now an increased pressure for graduates to be ready for the workforce as soon as they obtain their post-secondary degree (Succi & Wiendt, 2019; Wente, 2018). This demand of employers has been growing due to the heightened competition between potential candidates (Stewart et al., 2016), and thus, employers are more selective than before in their hiring decisions and prefer graduates who have relevant work experience (Wente, 2018).

Considering the perspectives of the respondents from this case study who asserted that there is a gap between how post-secondary institutions are preparing their students and what employers are seeking from new graduates, there is a necessity for higher education to train students for the rapidly evolving labour markets and meet the requirements of the emerging roles. This is where work-integrated learning programs come into play. As Cukier, Hodson, and Omar (2015) suggested merging soft-skills into academic courses while Yorke and Knight (2004) recommended embedding employability could be an effective method of teaching that can

complement students' technical knowledge, and this can be achieved through WIL programs (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Li, 2016; Martin & Rouleau, 2020). WIL could be highly beneficial for skills development as it can help students integrate theoretical analysis with practical experiences in the lived-in-world (Sattler & Peters, 2012) which will not only reduce the theory-practice gap but also train students for their first position upon entry into the labour market, as Rose indicated (see quote on page 85). This can ultimately lower their transitional barriers from school to work (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Li, 2016) while bridging the soft-skills gap between higher education and employment (Washor, 2015).

6.5 Theoretical Application: Perceptions of WIL (RQ1)

In relation to the perceptions of work-integrated learning programs, it has been discussed in Chapter 6.1 how both co-op and non co-op students consider WIL programs to have a positive impact on labour market outcomes post-graduation, emphasizing that WIL can increase the chance of job market success. This perception is consistent with the first proposition of human capital theory that states: *Work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education is an economic investment which can increase the employability of graduates, resulting in a smoother school-to-work transition* (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Sweetland, 1996). In line with this proposition of human capital theorists, Arts students also perceive WIL as an economic investment because it can improve the productivity and efficacy levels of graduates when they enter the labour market. As one of the Arts students Aria stated, WIL experience can act as "a piece of evidence for companies, or employers, or others, like an assurance that you have the minimum skills needed to perform basic jobs at least" (see full quotation on page 86). This corresponds to the ideologies of human capital theory that considers WIL as an economic investment as the experience from WIL during post-secondary education can be used for future financial gains (e.g., finding paid

work) after graduation (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Walters, 2004).

Moreover, the perceptions of co-op and non co-op students regarding the relevance of WIL programs and how it can help students to develop practical skills also corresponds with the first proposition of situated learning theory that states: *Work-integrated learning is an essential component of skills acquisition as students are more likely to develop transferable skills by combining classroom knowledge with practice-based experiences that are situated in real-world settings.* As another participant, Amara mentioned, simply focusing on theories is not sufficient as employers seek practical skills (see full quotation on page 93), which is why other participants such as Stella and Mason (see full quotations on page 91) suggested participating in WIL programs in order to acquire the necessary transferable skills that employers seek in the current labour market. Similar to the perceptions of Arts students from this case study, the first proposition of situated learning theory recognizes that there is a high value of WIL programs in terms of mitigating the effects of theory-practice gap by allowing students to integrate taught knowledge from classroom settings with applied skills in real-world situations (Bowen & Drysdale, 2017; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Furthermore, the viewpoints of Sociology, Psychology, and History students from this case study discussed in Chapter 6.2 corresponds with the second proposition of credential theorists which is: *Graduates who acquire a higher number of micro-credentials from participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education are more likely to be hired by employers in the 21st century labour markets* (Ashcroft et al., 2021). In alignment with this proposition, Arts students from Sociology, Psychology, and History disciplines mentioned that as Arts degrees are stigmatized, it is highly imperative to engage in WIL programs to "show to employers you got some experience (Stella – see page 91) and "to increase your value in the job

market" (Mason – see page 91). These perceptions of students suggest that one of the key reasons for participating in WIL programs is to get acknowledged in the labour market as a competent Arts student while satisfying employers' demands. Based on these perceptions, compared to all other disciplines, Arts students from Sociology, Psychology, and History programs are more likely to endorse the viewpoints of credential theorists that graduates who have a higher number of work-integrated learning experiences on their resume can easily find a job, not necessarily for having the required skillsets but rather because WIL programs can elevate the existing post-secondary degree and help graduates distinguish themselves among a pool of candidates with the similar academic credentials.

CHAPTER 6:
SUMMARY OF PERCEPTIONS OF WIL

Chapter 6 began with key findings on the perceptions of Arts students regarding work-integrated learning and its potential implications on labour market outcomes. In 6.1, it was discussed how the majority of Arts students perceive a positive association between WIL experience and labour market success, however, there were differences in how co-op versus non co-op students interpret the concept of work-integrated learning due to the variations in the level of exposure and experience of WIL programs, with the former group having higher awareness and understanding of WIL from their co-op placements. In Chapter 6.2, the differences in terms of how students from different fields of study perceive the value of WIL experiences in Arts versus non-Arts programs were addressed in-depth. For instance, on one hand, students from non-conventional Arts programs such as Accounting, Finance, and Economics consider the relevance of WIL to be same or similar in all degrees. On the other hand, students from traditional Arts programs such as Sociology, Psychology, and History perceive that WIL experience are likely to benefit Arts degree-holders more as they tend to experience greater challenges when entering the labour market due to stereotypes and stigma linked with Arts degrees. In Chapter 6.3, I have analyzed how despite the variations in perspectives among students from different fields of study within the Faculty of Arts, the majority of students from all programs have stated that there is a growing soft-skills gap between higher education and employment which can be bridged through participation in work-integrated learning programs as it can help students develop the necessary skills for the job market. This viewpoint is consistent with human capital theorists as well as situated learning theorists who perceive WIL programs to be highly beneficial for labour market success, unlike credential theorists who consider it as a supplementary micro-credential that emerged as a by-product of educational expansion to satisfy the demands of employers rather than a functional necessity (Ashcroft et al., 2021; Bouwer, Venketsamy & Bipath, 2021; Walters, 2004).

CHAPTER 7: BENEFITS OF WIL

Research Question (RQ 2a)

RQ 2a) *According to Arts students, what are the key benefits of participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education?*

7.1 Results: Key Findings

In this case study, the two broad categories of benefits that are associated with participating in work-integrated learning during post-secondary education that Arts students commonly stated are *Human Capital Growth* and *Graduate Employability*. Within the first category, students mentioned that WIL programs can help students to expand their human capital because WIL provides students with opportunities to improve or develop interpersonal qualities, increase their understanding of workplace culture through real-world exposure, and learn how to make informed decisions through career explorations at an early stage when the stakes of making errors are lower. Within the second category, Arts students mentioned that WIL programs can help to increase graduate employability by helping them build a professional portfolio, form new connections and networks with prospective employers, as well as enhance their work ethics. Both categories of benefits that Arts students highlighted are parallel to the propositions of human capital theory (HCT) that considers WIL as an economic investment for the labour market and as a human capital development technique that can contribute towards the growth of one's human capital (Bouwer, Venketsamy, & Bipath, 2021). Consequently, as the viewpoints of Arts students regarding the benefits of WIL programs align with the ideologies of HCT, they are in opposition with the perspectives of credential theorists who perceive a weak connection between the credentials achieved through post-secondary education and the skills needed to fulfill the job requirements (Davies & Guppy, 2010; Walters, 2004).

7.2 Human Capital Growth

"Well I strongly think WIL can help students gain cultural, social, economic capital, basically it can increase our human capital." - (Pamela, a 4th-year co-op Psychology student).

Similar to Pamela, a handful of Arts students from this case study, irrespective of co-op or non co-op streams, perceive that work-integrated learning programs can contribute towards an individual's human capital growth in various ways. When students were asked about the key benefits of WIL programs, some of the common responses were: 1) WIL can help students improve existing or develop new interpersonal skills; 2) WIL can enhance students' understanding of workplace culture; and 3) WIL can provide students opportunities to learn how to make informed career decisions by working in different jobs and gaining a wide range of experiences. As per Arts students, these can increase the intangible economic value (e.g., experience, skills, and knowledge) of graduates and maximize their financial capacity upon entry into the labour market—this process is often referred to as the human capital development (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Tan, 2014). Corresponding with the ideologies of human capital theorists, Arts students from this case study also view education as the central human capital investment. However, for Arts students, it is not just any type of education that they perceive to be beneficial, but rather they particularly consider work-integrated learning to be a successful educational model that can augment their human capital growth.

According to some of the Arts students from this case study, one way that work-integrated learning programs can increase human capital is by improving the existing interpersonal skills that students already possess from being in post-secondary institution, attending lectures, completing assignments, writing tests, or through any other form of engagement that assists in learning.

Students also mentioned that WIL programs can help them gain new interpersonal qualities that they did not have prior to experiencing WIL. According to Arts students, another way WIL can help students develop human capital is by enhancing students' understanding of workplace culture. For instance, Arts students mentioned that WIL provides opportunities to emerge in a work environment in which they can learn the shared values, beliefs, and practices that represent the organization that they are involved in. For example, one of the co-op students Nora who is majoring Accounting and Financial Management indicated that she learned "how the finance industry works…the bank's mission and vision" through her co-op placement. She also touched upon how she came to know about "the relationship between a customer and employee, and managers and workers" by participating in co-op. While referring to workplace culture, another co-op student Ruby who is pursuing History major referred to her work experience at the Royal Ontario Museum that "helped her understand how museum workplace operates on a day-to-day basis" which she was not aware of despite being a regular visitor of the museum. Both of these examples demonstrate how WIL programs can help students become familiar with different workplace cultures which ultimately contributes towards their human capital.

As per some of the Arts students, another benefit of WIL linked with human capital growth is that it can provide them with opportunities to learn how to make informed career decisions through exploring different job options at an early stage, when they are in their undergraduate studies where the stakes of making mistakes are lower than full-time positions after graduation. The following quotation by Daisy articulates this viewpoint:

> "I am majoring three things, so it's Business [Entrepreneurship minor], Psychology, and English. All three areas of my interest but if I wasn't in the co-op program and if I didn't try out different roles, I genuinely wouldn't know which one I am most interested in. Imagine I went into a career, wasted several years just to realize it's not meant for me. Like I want to become an Psychologist but I also want to do some sort of retail business few years later, and my backup plan

is to go to Teacher's College and become an English teacher, but only, and only if the first two plans don't work out, but for now, like now my first choice is to become a Psychologist, and I only figured this out after my 3rd co-op term." (Daisy)

As Daisy stated, she was able to arrange her three majors in order of career preference due to being involved in different co-op positions throughout her academic years. Like Daisy, other co-op students (e.g., Rose – see page 85) also indicated that they benefited from participating in WIL programs which helped them identify their career paths before joining the labour market as a full-time employee. This is consistent with current work-integrated learning literature that outlines how WIL programs can help students explore different occupational trajectories in order to gain a better understanding of the type of jobs that are available in one's field of study, the skills that are required, the common challenges, and the realities of the job position (BHER, 2015; Bowen & Drysdale, 2017; RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016).

7.3 Increase in Graduate Employability

Arts students from this case study responded that WIL programs can increase their graduate employability by helping them build a professional portfolio, forming new connections and networks with prospective employers, as well as developing the appropriate work ethics. In terms of the professional portfolio, Arts students stated that WIL programs provide students the opportunity "to gain practical experiences and develop skills that are relevant to their career" (Spencer) which can be "documented on resume" (Rachel). This suggests that as students complete WIL programs, they can include their accomplishments, work experiences, and learned skills in a portfolio. Another student, Maya, indicated that "sample work" can also be included in the portfolio such as reports, projects, presentations, and letter of recommendations. By including these materials in a professional portfolio, graduates are easily able to showcase their

employability and market themselves to potential employers in the labour market.

Along with professional portfolio, Arts students highlighted how WIL programs can help them build connections and networks in the real-world with professionals, employers, mentors, and other influential figures from a chosen field that matches their academic degree. To elaborate, during co-op placements or any other type of WIL programs, students meet people who are working in their field of study and learn about their journey. Through these interactions, if students make a positive impression in the eyes of their employers and colleagues, they may be able to receive references or additional opportunities in the industry. For example, Rebecca, a Psychology and Human Resource Management co-op student from this case study indicated that working as part of the Talent Acquisition team in her current organization helped her expand her professional network. Another student, Lucy who is majoring Accounting and Financial Management shared her experience of building connections through her co-op term that led to signing a full-time contract, as quoted below:

> "…If you take me as an example, I signed a full time offer to return to my previous co-op position after graduation, like right after without wasting any time because I made that connection, like you know, networking. This is my last term of undergrad, so you see, without work-integrated learning as in, my co-op program, I wouldn't have easily landed that opportunity. So I say that even if the work experience is not related to your program, I still say get a job to have some work experience. (Lucy)

As Lucy indicated, her WIL program helped her build connections and widen her networks which transformed a discrete co-op term into a full-time association with the company. Similar to Rebecca and Lucy, by working with professionals in their field, students mentioned that they can gain access to new projects, learn about relevant industry trends, and make stronger ties with people in their workplace that can help them advance their career. This is consistent with findings from current research that addresses the importance of forming connections and expanding

networks through WIL programs (Business Council of Canada, 2015; RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016). The new connections and networks can also contribute towards increasing a graduate's employability and providing them a competitive advantage in the job market post-graduation.

Furthermore, when Arts students in this case study were asked about the benefits of WIL programs, they explained how WIL programs can increase graduate employability by helping students enhance their work ethics. One of the students, Krivon, mentioned that "although PSE [post-secondary education] teaches you how to follow rules, how to meet deadlines, how to manage time, and other things, but it does not teach you the work ethics of an organization." Another student, Camille, stated that "you can only learn how a business or company operates if you are part of it, you can't just theorize it and be done with it." Similarly, Yasmin also said that "you need to be dive into the work culture to truly learn the work ethics, like the work ethics in a hospital would be different than a law firm so you need to go to the workplace to learn it." Through these statements, the students are suggesting that WIL programs can help you develop work ethics by providing you with real-world work exposure to professional environments and workplace culture. This is because during your WIL placement, you will be expected to follow workplace rules and abide by the organizational regulations. By complying with the workplace policies and practices, students can develop a strong work ethic which ultimately can make them more employable and lead to a successful professional career post-graduation, according to Arts students.

7.4 Theoretical Application: Benefits of WIL (RQ2a)

The findings regarding the benefits of participating in WIL programs support the two propositions of human capital theory (HCT). Recall from Chapter 3.1, the first proposition of HCT states: *Work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education is an economic investment which can increase the employability of graduates, resulting in a smoother school-to-work transition.* This proposition, WIL as an economic investment, corresponds with Arts students' comments on how WIL programs can increase graduate employability. For instance, Arts students explained that participating in WIL programs can increase graduate employability as these programs can help them build a professional portfolio, expand their connections and networks with prospective employers, and develop appropriate work ethics that is necessary for the labour market. These viewpoints align with the perspectives of human capital theorists who perceive work-integrated learning as an economic investment that can improve the productivity and efficacy levels of graduates when they enter the labour market (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Sweetland, 1996; Tan, 2014). Through work-integrated learning programs, students can increase their marketability as well as meet the expectations of employers (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Martin & Rouleau, 2020; Sattler & Peters, 2012). This proposition is consistent with Art students from both co-op and non co-op streams as the two groups have explained the different ways WIL can increase their graduate employability (see Chapter 7.3: *Increase in Graduate Employability*). Therefore, participating in WIL to increase graduate employability is essentially an economic investment that can lead to financial gains and job market success post-graduation, and thus, the perceptions of Arts students regarding the association between WIL programs and graduate employability precisely overlaps with the first proposition of human capital theory.

The second proposition of HCT states: *Work-integrated learning programs can help students focus on the development of human capital such as soft-skills acquisition, which may shift the emphasis that post-secondary institutions place on grading and certifying students.* This proposition, WIL as a human capital development technique, also corresponds with Arts students' comments regarding the benefits of WIL that are linked with human capital growth. As students mentioned, WIL can be highly valuable because it can increase their human capital by providing them opportunities to improve or develop interpersonal skills that are transferable. They also indicated that WIL can enhance their understanding of workplace culture through real-world exposure and help them learn how to make informed career decisions at an early stage (see Chapter 7.2: *Human Capital Growth*). All of these factors that Arts students have listed overlap with the second premise of human capital theorists who also perceive WIL as a technique to develop transferable skills.

Moreover, based on the second proposition of human capital theory, work-integrated learning can help students develop human capital which may shift the focus that post-secondary institutions place on grading and certifying students (Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Schinske & Tanner, 2014). This proposition is consistent with Arts students' viewpoints of how WIL programs can help them advance their human capital by allowing them to focus more on skills development instead of grades. As Eliza, one of the Psychology students mentioned, WIL can contribute towards human capital growth through the practical skills acquisition instead of "memorizing a whole bunch of things about how the brain works to the point where your brain stops working [referring to her Psychology course materials]…writing so many tests, worrying about grades all the time, it's just, just doesn't work in the long-run." In line with Eliza's comments, a few other students also emphasized that there is a "higher importance" (Spencer) and

"heavy focus" (Blake) on grades than skills enhancement. Based on these responses, it can be concluded that students are concerned about the heightened emphasis on grading and certifying that scholars and researchers also highlighted in their contemporary research studies (Kromydas, 2017; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Schinske and Tanner, 2014). To shift the focus from grading and certifying, human capital theorists recommend concentrating on skills advancement such as by participating in work-integrated learning programs which encourage students to apply the learned knowledge from classrooms in real-world situations (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018). This process can help students gather work experience that employers seek, resulting in fewer transitional barriers from higher education to employment (Galarneau, Kinack & Marshall, 2020).

Research Question (RQ 2b)

RQ 2b) *What are the transferable soft-skills that Arts students have developed and/or expect to develop through work-integrated learning programs to better prepare themselves for the labour market?*

7.5 Results: Key Findings

The transferable soft-skills that Arts students have highlighted who are in the co-op program differed from the ones who are in the non co-op stream. While the co-op students reflected on their first-hand experiences of WIL that helped them develop practical and theoretical skills, the non co-op students spoke about the generic sof- skills that students can expect to develop through WIL programs which were primarily based on information they have read on institutional websites, emails received from their post-secondary institution, and conversations with their friends or family members from co-op streams. It is critically important to emphasize that the

transferable soft-skills that co-op students have discussed in their responses were a combination of practical and theoretical skills (see Table 3 on the next page – both columns). In contrast, the transferable soft-skills that non co-op students described had an underlying theoretical notion as they were using terms such as "knowing" the skill (Amelia) or "understanding" how to apply the skill (Eden) (see Table 3 on the next page – right column). The variation in responses between co-op and non co-op students derived from the differences in their level of familiarity with WIL programs as the former group participated in WIL programs in which they have developed both practical and theoretical skills whereas the latter referred to the most common soft-skills that any field of study tend to have. Broadly, Arts students' responses regarding the transferable soft-skills that they have developed or expect to develop through WIL programs support the two propositions of situated learning theory that perceives WIL as an effective method of skills acquisition and as a dual-learning opportunity, while contradicting the ideologies of credential theory that do not place a high importance on WIL programs, and rather views it as a by-product of educational expansions (Walters, 2004), and as a supplementary micro-credential to meet the demands of employers (Ashcroft et al., 2021).

Table 3: Soft Skills Development through WIL Programs[1]

Co-op Students[2] ***Practical Skills*** *(Developed through WIL)*	**Co-op & Non Co-op Students** ***Theoretical Skills*** *(Developed/ Expect to Develop through WIL)*
✓ **Demonstrating Analytical Competencies:** Being able to apply theories in real-world settings.	✓ **Communication:** Knowing how to speak clearly and concisely.
✓ **Leadership Traits:** Leading a team or training new hires (e.g., junior co-op students).	✓ **Critical Thinking:** Knowing how to critically engage with work.
✓ **Workplace Expectations:** Understanding and meeting the expectations of your managers.	✓ **Teamwork:** Understanding how to collaborate with others.
✓ **Labour Market Knowledge:** Staying updated with emerging industry trends and technological innovations or software.	✓ **Problem-solving:** Knowing how to overcome challenges that may occur in the workplace.
✓ **Increased Cultural Awareness:** Being able to work with diverse people from different backgrounds.	✓ **Time-management:** Knowing how to work under pressure and meeting multiple deadlines.
✓ **Persevering Diligently:** Navigating the complexities of the workforce without giving up.	✓ **Quick Learner:** Knowing how to take notes and learn new materials in a timely manner.

[1]The responses in Table 3 have been arranged in descending order as per the level of prevalence (the number of times each response has appeared in Otter.ai transcripts).

[2] The practical skills on the left column are the ones that co-op students have developed in addition to the theoretical skills indicated under the mutual list of responses from both co-op and non co-op students on the right column (N = 50).

7.6 Transferable Soft-Skills

In this case study, when Arts students were asked about the transferable skills that they have developed or expect to develop, the co-op students discussed a combination of practical and theoretical skills (right and left columns) that they have developed from their current or former work placements. One of the most common responses from co-op students was that prior to going

into their first co-op program, they were not aware of how to apply their learned classroom knowledge. Through co-op placements, they learned how to combine the taught knowledge with real-world practical situations. For example, one of the co-op students, Avery mentioned that she learned different software such as "python and Java," but she did not know "how to merge her portion of the work with her teammates' work conveniently" and "how to incorporate her manager's feedback into her work" as she mostly coded independently. This suggests that she learned how to work with others through her WIL experience. Another co-op student, Yara, mentioned how she did not expect that finding a co-op placement would be as "tedious" as it was for her. Yara said, "If finding a relevant co-op position was so tedious and difficult, I can only image how tough it would be to find a full-time job after graduating, but like, I am glad I learned the ropes, like how to navigate this process before jumping into the workforce blindly with zero experience." Avery, Yara, and a few other co-op students indicated that WIL experience helped them develop transferable soft-skills which they can apply upon entry to the labour market post-graduation.

Unlike co-op students who listed both practical and theoretical skills, those who are from the non co-op stream listed only transferable soft-skills that they expect to develop from WIL programs such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, time management, and being a quick learner. As indicated above in Chapter 7.5 (*Key Research Findings* from RQ 2b), the non co-op students' explanations of the transferable soft-skills had an underlying theoretical notion as they were using terms such as "knowing" the skill (Amelia) or "understanding" how to apply the skill (Eden) (see Table 3 above – right column). For example, a non co-op student, Mason, stated that "co-op can teach you how to overcome workplace challenges…meet deadlines on time" which is essentially referring to how to solve a problem and

how to manage time in the real-world. However, students who participated in co-op placements explained their answers using concrete examples such as their practical experiences of dealing with “unexpected challenges” in their workplace and handling “multiple deadlines.” To further clarify, for example, while both co-op and non co-op students understands that WIL can teach them how to overcome challenges and meet deadlines, only the former group were truly able to explain the extent to which workplace challenges or deadlines may unfold in the real-world based on their WIL experiences. In other words, it is common-sense knowledge that there may be challenges and deadlines in any field of study, however, without participating in real-world situations, it is difficult to interpret how those obstacles may vary or what the frequency and conditions of due dates may be. Therefore, participating in WIL programs can help students gain the transferable soft-skills that are required for the labour market, as articulated by Arts students and as supported by current WIL literature (Galarneau, Kinack, & Marshall, 2020; Martin & Rouleau, 2020).

7.7 Effective School-to-Work Transition

In the context of WIL program, when students were asked about the transferable soft-skills that they have developed or expect to develop through WIL programs, the majority of them indicated that participating in WIL programs can lead to a smoother school-to-work transition as they can utilize the soft-skills while transitioning to the labour market post-graduation. Arts students, irrespective of whether they are from a co-op or non co-op streams, were well-aware of the value of transferable soft-skills among current employers. For instance, Amara (a co-op student) and Matilda (a non co-op student) both emphasized the importance of transferable soft-skills in order to have an efficient transition from school-to-work. While Amara described the

transition to be “easy and hassle-free,” Matilda explained it as “less challenging with few barriers” when transferable soft-skills are gained through WIL programs. Matilda in particular expressed her “regret” for not choosing the co-op program (see Matilda’s quotation on page 88). This further reinforces her perspective on the relevance of WIL and its potential implications on labour market success.

Among the transferable soft-skills that can lead to an effective school-to-work transition, the top five that contemporary recruiters have listed are: growth mindset, continuous learning, critical thinking, survival skills, and resilience as per Forbes Human Resource Council (2021). While some of these traits have been mentioned by students in this case study (see Table 3), the remaining are synonymous to the skills that Forbes (2021) have identified in their survey. Another study on employer’s ratings of importance of required skills and competencies of graduates revealed that the top six skills are: Works well with others; critical thinking/problem solving; listening skills; communication skills; professionalism; and personal motivation (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). Some of these interpersonal skills also overlap with the ones that students have highlighted. However, it is important to note that the list of theoretical skills (right column in Table 3) that co-op students have developed and non co-op students expect to develop matches more closely to the list of skills that employers and recruiters expect from incoming graduates. This suggests that participating in co-op can prepare students with the skills that employers seek. In addition to the theoretical skills that employers demand, co-op students have also developed practical skills through their WIL experience (left column in Table 3). This implies that WIL programs can go beyond enhancing theoretical skills that students or graduates already possess as part of their post-secondary education and can help them develop new practical skills that they did not have prior to WIL participation.

7.8 Theoretical Application: Benefits of WIL (RQ 2b)

The findings regarding the transferable soft-skills that co-op students particularly developed through WIL programs support the two propositions of situated learning theory (SLT). As noted in Chapter 3.3, the first proposition of SLT states: *Work-integrated learning is an essential component of skills acquisition as students are more likely to develop transferable skills by combining classroom knowledge with practice-based experiences that are situated in real-world settings.* This proposition, WIL as an effective method of skills acquisition, corresponds with co-op students' responses who mentioned that they were able to develop a wide range of practical soft-skills by participating in WIL programs such as demonstrating analytical competencies, having an increased cultural awareness, staying updated about new labour market trends, being able to lead a team or train new incoming co-op students, preserving in the workforce, and understanding as well as meeting the expectations of their managers (see Table 3 – left column). These findings are consistent with scholars of SLT who argue that students are more likely to learn by participating actively in real-world situations (Bouwer, Venketsamy, & Bipath, 2021; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Theodorakopoulos & Figueira, 2012). In line with the ideologies of SLT, co-op students expressed in their responses that they experienced a positive effect on their learning outcomes (e.g., higher skills acquisition and labour market knowledge) compared to classroom learning where practical work is absent. For example, Wilma, a co-op student in Accounting and Financial Management program mentioned that she "learned more through hands-on experiences than attending lectures." Wilma's comment also aligns with the perspectives of situated learning theory that lie on the conception of acquiring knowledge and skills from real-world settings instead of exclusively relying on theorical analysis (Bowen & Drysdale, 2017; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The second proposition of SLT—w*ork-integrated learning programs provide an opportunity to learn 'in' practice as well as learn 'from' practice by situating oneself in natural*

environments where the learned knowledge can be applied—is also supported by the responses of co-op students who have developed a combination of practical and theoretical skills through WIL programs. For instance, co-op students mentioned that they were able to gain transferable soft-skills by learning *in* and learning *from* practice. Recall from Chapter 3.3 that learning *in* practice takes place when the learner observes another individual practicing the technique, whereas learning *from* practice occurs when the learner practices the technique on their own within the situated learning environment (Assan, 2014). The most common example of learning *in* and *from* practice that co-op students articulated were associated with leadership traits; co-op students were able to learn by observing others in their field and by practicing their learning within the workplace. For example, one of the co-op students, Dana, from Accounting and Financial Management stated the following:

> "Co-op gave me the opportunity to learn by doing my own tasks, the job duties that were assigned to me, but also like, I also learned by observing another administrative agent who was more experienced and her desk was adjacent to mine. Sometimes I would just listen in when she is answering calls, like how she is speaking to others, how formal is she is being or if it's more casual convo. She is also very good at multi-tasking which I picked up from her after like 3 months, definitely not right away. And sometimes like, I would just ask her for help with Excel or data entries or something else that I needed and like, we would do it together so that I could practice it. I am more of a hands-on learner so like, I need to really practice it over and over again for my brain to remember it, even if it's just one or two clicks, I still won't remember which buttons to click through if I don't do it myself." (Dana)

As Dana mentioned, she applied the dual-learning technique in her co-op placement by observing her colleague and practicing the task by herself as well. This enabled her to not only master the existing skills, but it also helped her develop new practical skills such as multi-tasking. Like Dana, who engaged in dual-learning approach, other co-op students were also able to learn from their colleagues, employers, and mentors in their field while simultaneously applying the learned knowledge in their own tasks. As Dana implied through her response, the dual-learning process was instrumental in terms of developing new practical skills and enhancing her existing

theoretical skills. As such, the development of practical, transferable skills through WIL programs that co-op students highlighted overlaps with the second proposition of SLT that considers WIL as a dual-learning opportunity.

The findings regarding co-op students' skills development are also consistent with Hawkins and Rogers' (2016) study on student teachers' experiences of practicing teaching in the community, and Bouwer and her research team's (2021) work on student teachers who participated in WIL programs, as explained in Chapter 3.3. The results from both scholarly studies revealed that there were several associated benefits of participating in WIL programs as it provided them an opportunity to develop skills that are needed to teach their own classes in the future. The findings from Hawkins and Rogers' (2016) project and Bouwer and her colleagues' (2021) study also reveal that WIL programs help participants understand their own role as well as the role of others more in-depth, which ultimately allows them to reflect on their performance and improve it accordingly. From a holistic perspective, considering these two studies and co-op students' responses, those who engage in situated learning such as WIL programs have a lower chance of encountering barriers when transitioning from higher education to employment. Therefore, situated-learning theorists support WIL programs and consider it an essential component of a successful post-secondary educational model that can maximize knowledge and skills acquisition.

CHAPTER 7:
SUMMARY OF BENEFITS OF WIL

In Chapter 7, I have discussed the benefits of work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education, from the viewpoints of Arts students. In the first section (7.1 to 7.4), I have answered RQ (2a): *According to Arts students, what are the key benefits of participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education?* In relation to this question, the findings from this case study which addresses the benefits of WIL have been categorized broadly as *Human Capital Growth* and *Graduate Employability*. Within the first category, students mentioned that WIL programs can assist in terms of expanding one's human capital by providing students with opportunities to improve or develop interpersonal qualities, enhance their understanding of workplace culture through real-world exposure, and learn how to make informed career decisions at an early stage through exploration of different job positions. Within the second category, Arts students mentioned that WIL programs can help to increase graduate employability by building a professional portfolio, forming connections and networks with prospective employers, as well as developing the necessary work ethics. Both categories of benefits that Arts students perceive support the propositions of human capital theory that considers WIL as an economic investment that can increase graduate employability and as a human capital development technique that can contribute towards the growth of one's human capital (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Sweetland, 1996; Tan 2014), while being in opposition of the viewpoints of credentialism that perceives WIL as a by-product of educational expansion rather than a functional necessity (Davies & Guppy, 2010; Walters, 2004).

In the second section (7.5 to 7.8), I have addressed RQ (2b): *What are the transferable soft skills that Arts students have developed and/or expect to develop through work-integrated learning programs to better prepare themselves for the labour market?* In regard to this question, the findings from this case study show that the transferable soft skills that Arts students mentioned who are in the co-op program differed from the ones who are in the non co-op stream. The transferable soft-skills that co-op students have discussed in their responses were a combination of practical and theoretical skills. In contrast, the transferable soft-skills that non co-op students have described had an underlying theoretical notion (see Table 3). The variation in responses between co-op and non co-op students' responses may have derived from the differences in the level of familiarity with WIL programs as the former group participated in WIL through which they developed new practical skills that they did not possess before entering the labour market whereas the latter referred to common soft-skills that graduates from any field of study should have such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, and being able to learn quickly. Arts students' responses regarding the transferable soft-skills that they have developed or expect to develop through WIL programs support the two propositions of situated learning theory that perceives WIL as an effective method of skills acquisition and as a dual-learning opportunity, while contradicting the ideologies of credential theorists who do not place a high importance of WIL programs and rather views it as a supplementary micro-credential to enhance the existing post-secondary degree or diploma (Ashcroft et al., 2021).

CHAPTER 8: CHALLENGES OF WIL

Research Question (RQ3)

RQ3: *According to Arts students, what are the common challenges associated with participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education?*

8.1 Results: Key Findings

In terms of the common challenges that are associated with participating in work-integrated learning programs, the non co-op and co-op students encountered different types of barriers and reflected upon their individualistic experiences in post-secondary education. While the non co-op students voiced their concerns regarding the insufficient exposure and awareness of work-integrated learning as an educational model in post-secondary institutions which resulted in their lack of participation (e.g., Hazel and Amelia – see quotation on pages 118 and 119), the co-op students expressed that there are limited field-specific WIL placements as well as low departmental and faculty support. Both groups of students have expressed that there is a shortage of WIL opportunities for Arts students specifically, though they have indicated that the University of Waterloo has relatively more co-op programs across all fields of study in comparison to other universities and colleges. Despite the variation in the type of challenges experienced by co-op and non co-op students, both groups acknowledged the positive impact of WIL programs in labour market success which aligns with the first proposition of human capital theory that perceives WIL as an economic investment for the job market (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019).

8.2 Insufficient Exposure and Awareness Levels

(Non Co-op Students' Perspectives)

The non co-op students from this case study indicated that there is insufficient exposure and awareness levels of work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary institutions. When students were asked about whether they were familiar with WIL programs prior to enrolling in their current post-secondary institution, a few of the non co-op students stated they were not aware of the concept of "work-integrated learning" before attending the University of Waterloo. Although they heard the term co-op in high-school, they were not familiar with the term "WIL" or "work-integrated learning." Moreover, when students were asked what do they know about WIL programs after being in post-secondary institution for four years that they did now know at the start of their undergraduate journey, the non co-op students mentioned that they have heard from friends, peers, faculty, and staff about the different types of WIL programs that are available in post-secondary education aside from the traditional co-op placement.

When Hazel, one of the non co-op students was asked about the level of exposure and awareness of WIL programs in post-secondary education, she answered the following:

> "Ah, without a doubt, there is lack of awareness of working while studying as part of your degree. Okay, so many students know you can do a part-time job while being in school, but they, they don't really know you can actually get academic credits for working as part of WIL programs which is different from just, you know just doing a part-time job outside of your degree. If I knew the things I know about it now, I would have been in a co-op program which would have helped me to easily find a job after graduating." (Hazel)

Similar to Hazel who perceives that there is a lack of awareness surrounding WIL, another non co-op student, Amelia, expressed a similar concern as quoted below:

> "Ya I think there is definitely a lack of awareness, especially in all Arts departments which is why Arts students struggle the most when they try work after graduating…Like how many people in those Spanish, French, English, history, gender studies, digital arts and media, anthropology, religion, or philosophy studies actually know about co-op or WIL? Oh, and international relations is

another one too, my roommate is doing that major. People don't even know what some of these programs are let alone knowing what the heck WIL is and how it can increase our job prospects. People just know STEM programs and Sciences like bio, chem, physics, health science, so ya…like in our department [Economics], people know about co-op of course and I knew about its existence too, but, but I didn't know exactly how it works so I didn't enroll in it." (Amelia)

Hazel, Amelia, and a few other students indicated that due to the lack of awareness and exposure levels of WIL programs for Arts students, they did not choose the co-op stream though they acknowledge the benefits of WIL programs and its implication on labour market success (e.g., "easily find a job after graduating" – Hazel). In terms of lack of awareness and exposure levels, students explained that although they have heard of co-op in their current institution, they "didn't know exactly how it works" (Amelia), which factored in their decision to not enroll in the co-op program. Furthermore, based on Amelia's thorough response, the lack of awareness of WIL programs is lower in the Faculty of Arts, and even within Arts, it also varies among the different departments such as Economics students may have a higher level of exposure to WIL programs compared to other programs. Amelia's viewpoints are consistent with current literature on WIL. For instance, Martin and Rouleau's (2020) study revealed that WIL is perceived as an essential component of the curriculum in STEM fields where students are matched with prospective employers. On the contrary, Arts programs do not advertise WIL as a fundamental aspect of post-secondary education which is predicted to be the reason behind a lower level of participation in WIL programs among Arts students (Li, 2016).

8.3 Limited WIL Programs for Arts Students

(Non Co-op and Co-op Students' Perspectives)

Deriving from perceptions of lack of exposure and awareness of WIL programs, the non co-op students as well as the co-op students have stated that if compared to STEM programs, there

are limited WIL programs for the Arts students in post-secondary institutions across Ontario including the University of Waterloo. However, they also mentioned that when compared with other universities and colleges in Ontario, the University of Waterloo has relatively more co-op programs for all fields of study including the Faculty of Arts. These perceptions precisely align with WIL-related findings in contemporary sociological literature and institutional reports that state STEM fields put a greater emphasis on WIL programs than Arts discipline. Research findings also indicate that the University of Waterloo is the world's largest co-op institution, and it is considered a strong exemplar of work-integrated learning programs not only across Canada but on a global level as well. This suggests that the number of WIL programs, particularly co-op at UW is relatively higher than other institutions which the participants of this case study, being 4th-year undergraduates at UW, are well-aware of (Ashcroft et al., 2021; BHER, 2015; University of Waterloo, 2023a).

Non co-op student:

"…definitely a shortage of WIL programs in Arts fields everywhere, even in Waterloo but Waterloo still does a better job than other schools…Postsecondary education doesn't have the same amount of opportunities for all programs and it does not matter if you are in Ontario or all the way in Yukon Territory or somewhere in between like BC, Quebec or Manitoba." (Sarah)

Co-op student:

"I would say there is a lack of co-op programs for Arts students in universities and colleges compared to other programs like STEM, which shouldn't be the case because Arts students are struggling the most in the workforce. If we take Waterloo as an example, like it's known for all the great co-op opportunities, but you know it's mostly for STEM students. But ya, you know it's, it's still doing better than other universities for sure." (Taylor)

As depicted by the above quotations, according to both non co-op and co-op students, there are limited work-integrated learning opportunities across post-secondary institutions including the University of Waterloo for Arts students when compared to non-Arts disciplines such as STEM.

Considering the history of co-op programs for Arts versus non-Arts programs, this perspective is evident in literature. Recall from Chapter 2.4, in 1903 in England, at the University of Sunderland, when WIL was first launched as part of the *British Sandwich Program*, it was exclusively offered to engineering and architecture students (Co-operative Education Manual, 2005). Similar to the *British Sandwich Program*, when WIL was introduced in the USA at the University of Cincinnati by Professor Schneider, it was exclusively designed for engineering students during its initial phase (Co-operative Education Manual, 2005; Neihaus, 2018). Afterward, in 1957 when the University of Waterloo implemented WIL as the first Canadian institution to adopt this educational model, it was also designed for engineering students (University of Waterloo, 2023a). Fast forward to the 21st century, WIL continues to be an important part of STEM programs, whereas it is still not promoted as an integral component of post-secondary education among Arts disciplines (Li, 2016). This is highly problematic because compared to other fields of study, researchers have discovered that Arts graduates experience a severe "mal-employment" challenge, meaning that they are either under-or unemployed which limits their ability to demonstrate their full potential (Zeid et al., 2015, p. 1). On top of the long existing student competition in higher education in Canada (Davies & Hammack, 2005), the labour market competition among graduates in less advantageous fields such as the Arts discipline not only increases the prevailing employment challenges, but also makes it more difficult than ever to thrive in the current economy (Zeid et al., 2015).

On the positive side, compared to all other post-secondary institutions in Ontario, the University of Waterloo has a higher number of WIL opportunities, in particular, co-op programs. It is also the first institution to expand its WIL programs outside of the STEM disciplines in 1957 by acknowledging the value of work-integrated learning for all fields of study (University of

Waterloo, 2023a). As Taylor stated above, the University of Waterloo is "doing better than other universities" when it comes to providing WIL opportunities for post-secondary students including those who are from the Faculty of Arts. In addition, although the University of Waterloo was the first to recognize the value of work-integrated learning programs, it is no longer the only institution. From 1970's onwards, WIL expanded quickly in both universities and colleges across Canada, primarily as co-op programs. This implies that the number of WIL opportunities are expected to rise over the next few years due to educational expansions, technological advancements, and scientific innovations.

8.4 Lack of Field-Specific WIL Placements

(Co-op Students' Perspectives)

A key challenge that Arts co-op students have encountered was the lack of field-specific WIL programs. Among the WIL opportunities that are available, Arts students mentioned that the majority of them are related to positions that are administrative roles or customer service oriented. This perception was primarily based on their experiences of *WaterlooWorks* which is an institutional website that is specifically designed for students and alumni at the University of Waterloo to find available job postings and connect with prospective employers (University of Waterloo, 2023c). As Melody, one of the co-op students shared in-depth, her experience on the *WaterlooWorks* website was "extremely frustrating" as she was not able to find any position that is related to her majors which are Psychology and Sexuality, Marriage, and Family Studies. As a result of lack of field-specific WIL placements, she felt "obligated to accept" a position in marketing even though it is unrelated to her academic discipline. Another co-op student Ruby who is majoring History, shared that her experience of looking for field-specific co-op was also "unsuccessful" in the beginning, and thus, she initially accepted a research assistant position for a

project that do not correspond with her interests or career goals, however, she later found a job that at the Royal Ontario Museum which aligned more closely to her academic discipline (see page 101). When students were asked whether they searched outside of *WaterlooWorks*, they expressed that they also struggled to find field-specific positions on employment websites such as Indeed.ca, Monster.ca, and Workpolis.ca.

Moreover, a few of the students shared that the challenge of finding field-specific WIL positions is not unique to Arts students at the University of Waterloo. For instance, a co-op student (Mia) provided examples of her sister who is in a co-op program at another institution in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and her cousin who attends a co-op program at a Northern Ontario institution; both encountered difficulties to find field-specific co-op placements. Another co-op student Brian also shared his elder brother's experience who is majoring Philosophy but only engaged in customer service roles. In terms of his own experience, Brian who is in the Accounting and Financial Management (AFM) program mentioned that only one of his co-op positions was field-specific which he landed after "a lot of rejections," while the rest of his co-op placements were not related to AFM.

Given the challenge of finding field-specific co-op positions in Arts programs that students indicated, when they were further prompted to share their perceptions of why this might be a challenge in the Arts field, co-op students speculated that employers from large firms, businesses, and organizations are either "not willing to invest in training and mentoring" co-op students who are in Arts programs (Melody), or they "do not have the necessary resources" such as funding, staff, and time to invest (Savana). Other students emphasized the high competition in the current labour market and limited job opportunities for specific fields of study. For this reason, they predict that employers might be more selective in hiring practices. Business and Higher Education

Roundtable (2015) refers to this as the "supply and demand" problem as post-secondary institutions and their stakeholders often have difficulty identifying an appropriate balance between work-integrated learning programs and the needs of students from specific fields. Furthermore, when students were asked whether there is a gap between how post-secondary institutions are training students and what employers are seeking from new graduates, students have highlighted that there could be a "lack of coordination" (Opal) and "probably low communication" (Aria) between post-secondary institutions and employers, resulting in the widening gap between higher education and labour market.

8.5 Low Departmental & Faculty Support

(Co-op Students' Perspectives)

Another challenge that Arts students have indicated is low departmental and faculty support, meaning that their needs are not being adequately addressed by post-secondary institutions. "Adapting to the needs of students" is vital, as Owen Gallupe, an Associate Professor and Associate Chair of the University of Waterloo highlighted in an interview with a co-op student as part of a special project *(Teaching Stories)* from the *Centre for Teaching Excellence* (University of Waterloo, 2014). Dr. Gallupe's viewpoints correspond with the perspectives of other instructors at UW (University of Waterloo, 2023b). However, this approach is not equally practiced among all departments and faculty according to the perceptions of Arts students in this case study. This is a key challenge associated with WIL programs that co-op students have indicated. Out of the 50 students interviewed in this study, 42 were co-op students. Among these co-op students, 11 of them which is approximately 26% of the co-op sample in this project expressed that they did not receive adequate amount of support in the form of information, resources, and/or services when they reached out for help via email or in-person. Students further added that the process of applying

and interviewing for co-op positions can be "exhausting" as you are doing it every few months (Abigail), so there is "less stability" which is why having departmental and faculty support is crucial (Daisy). When prompted further to elaborate on the low departmental and faculty support, the most common experience that students shared were involving the lack of timely response and the lack of specificity of information received from their department and/or faculty. For example, one of the co-op students, Yara, stated the following:

> "…there is ridiculously low departmental support when it comes to helping students find co-op positions, like you can send an email and they will either provide a short reply that is super vague or tell you to check out this or that website, but like, nobody actually walks you through the process, like if you don't understand a concept in class you can go to your TA or prof, and they will sit down and explain it to you, but like, when you ask staff or faculty members or anybody a question about finding a co-op placement, they barely know the specific information like specific answers, so the process was very tedious but now I finally feel prepared after 4 years of going through this tedious process so I know I will have a higher chance of being successful when I enter the job world." (Yara)

As Yara indicated, she experienced "ridiculously low departmental support" as she was not receiving step-by-step process of finding co-op placements or specific answers from the department or faculty. Similar to Yara, other students have also stated their concern of not receiving "adequate support" from the department, staff, or faculty (Janet, Audrey, and Sophia). The negative experiences of these co-op students could be a result of administrative burdens as running a WIL program is a labour-intensive and time-consuming process for educational institutions and their industry partners (BHER, 2015). Furthermore, when students were asked about whether the challenges were different for Arts versus non-Arts students, many of them have indicated that the challenges are higher for Arts students as their degrees tend to be "less favourable in the job market" which is consistent with the findings that contemporary researchers discovered that Arts graduates struggle the most in terms of finding employment during their academic years (Yamamoto, 2014) as well as post-graduation upon entry into the labour market (Zeid et al., 2015).

8.6 Theoretical Application: Challenges of WIL

The challenges expressed by Arts students from this case study cannot be reflected by the two theoretical propositions of human capital theory that states WIL is an economic investment for the labour market and WIL is a human capital development technique—both propositions refer to the benefits of WIL rather than explaining the challenges. Similarly, the two propositions of situated learning theory asserts that WIL is an effective method of skills acquisition and WIL is a dual-learning opportunity which also reinforces the benefits of WIL. Conversely, credentialism is more critical to WIL programs as credential theorists considers WIL as a by-product of educational expansion and as a supplementary micro-credential, however, none of these propositions have emerged within Arts students' responses regarding the challenges of WIL.

Although the challenges of WIL cannot be reflected by the theoretical propositions of HCT, SLT, or credentialism, it is important to recognize that while speaking about the challenges, Arts students, from both co-op and non co-op streams, have indicated that there is a positive influence of WIL programs in labour market success which precisely aligns with the first proposition of human capital theory that perceives WIL as an economic investment which can increase the employability of graduates, resulting in a smoother school-to-work transition. For instance, as noted in Chapter 8.2, while speaking about the issue of insufficient exposure and awareness levels of WIL programs, Arts students mentioned that "more WIL programs are needed for Arts students in order to help them gain skills and experience" (Sarah) "because Arts students are struggling the most in the workforce" (Taylor). This indicates that Arts students consider WIL as an economic investment that has positive future implications on their job success, reinforcing the first proposition of HCT. Moreover, while addressing the challenges, although non co-op students

mentioned that due to insufficient level of exposure and awareness of WIL, they were not able to join the co-op program in their current institution, they acknowledge that WIL can "increase job prospects" (Amelia) and help them "easily find a job after graduating" (Hazel). This further supports the first proposition of HCT that perceives WIL as an economic investment.

In Chapter 8.4 and 8.5, co-op students mentioned that during the process of finding a suitable WIL placement, they realized that there was a lack of field-specific WIL placements as well as low departmental and faculty support. While explaining these two types of challenges, they emphasized on the importance of participating in co-op programs again by highlighting that any WIL experience—even if it is unrelated to one's field of study—is beneficial for labour market success (e.g., "have a higher chance of being successful when I enter the job world" - Yara). This further suggests that students consider WIL as an economic investment that has future implications for their job prospects, supporting the first proposition of HCT. Yara's viewpoints also correspond with Martin and Rouleau's (2020) quantitative study on the correlation of work-integrated learning programs and labour market outcomes which demonstrated that having work experience, even if it is unrelated to one's field of study can be more beneficial than not having any practical experience before entering the workforce. This is because work experience can act as a proof of competencies, and thus, participating in WIL can be considered an economic investment for post-graduation financial gains, reinforcing the first proposition of HCT.

CHAPTER 8:
SUMMARY OF CHALLENGES OF WIL

Chapter 8 addressed the key challenges of work-integrated learning programs that are experienced by Arts students. Through this chapter, I have discussed how some of the challenges differ among non co-op and co-op students based on their individualistic experiences in post-secondary education. The non co-op students voiced their concerns regarding the insufficient exposure and awareness of work-integrated learning in post-secondary institutions which resulted in their lack of participation. Alternatively, the co-op students expressed that there are limited field-specific WIL placements as well as low departmental and faculty-level support which made their process of seeking and securing a co-op position more challenging. Both groups of students expressed that there is a shortage of WIL opportunities for Arts students specifically, though they have indicated that the University of Waterloo has relatively more co-op programs across all fields of study in comparison to other universities and colleges. Despite the variations in the type of challenges experienced by co-op and non co-op students, both groups acknowledged the positive impact of WIL programs in labour market success which aligns with the first proposition of human capital theory that perceives WIL as an economic investment for labour market success (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019).

CHAPTER 9: POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF WIL

Research Question (RQ4)

RQ 4: *Which WIL policies or practices do Arts students recommend for post-secondary institutions that can potentially improve their school-to-work transitions?*

9.1 Results: Key Findings

Pertaining to WIL policies and practices, Arts students indicated that there is a lack of standardized WIL procedures across different fields of study, making it difficult for students to understand how these programs operate in post-secondary education. This is particularly problematic for students who are pursing a set of majors/minors that are unrelated to each other such as Music and Psychology or History and German Studies. Students' responses suggest that there could be a mismatch between what students expect from a co-op program and how it actually operates in the real-world. Students have also indicated that despite the benefits associated with WIL programs, it can increase the workload, academic pressure, and the duration of a post-secondary degree which can potentially hinder students' mental health and well-being, and thus, they recommend that WIL should remain an optional practice instead of it being a mandatory requirement to achieve a post-secondary degree. In addition to this suggestion, students have also provided specific recommendations for each of the challenges discussed in Chapter 8 and 9.2 such as increasing awareness of WIL programs through more communication with Arts students, expanding partnerships with potential employers, standardizing the evaluation and assessment procedures of WIL, and hosting WIL workshops and events that are specifically designed for Arts students. Since Arts students' recommendations are all catered to increasing the employability of graduates, it supports the first proposition of the human capital theory which perceives WIL as an

economic investment for the labour market that can help students become more equipped while meeting the demands of employers.

9.2 Lack of Standardized WIL Policies and Practices

In relation to the policies and practices in work-integrated learning programs, the central comment that repeatedly appeared in the interview transcripts is revolving around the lack of standardized WIL procedures across different fields of study. Since Art students from the University of Waterloo are primarily familiar with the co-op program, they used it as an example to describe their experiences regarding lack of clarity and consistency in how co-op operates in different fields of study. From a broad perspective, they indicated that lack of standardized policies and practices makes it challenging for students to understand how these programs are run in post-secondary education such as the procedures of enrolling in co-op, the academic credits associated with co-op, the evaluation process of co-op, and the completion requirements of co-op. Without fully understanding these, it can be difficulty to combine the classroom knowledge with real-world experiences in order to maximize the benefits of co-op and gain practical skills that are transferable to the labour market post-graduation (BHER, 2015; Co-operative Education Manual, 2015; RBC Career Development, 2016).

Specifically, Arts students emphasized how co-op programs may vary in different fields of study. For instance, as some of the Arts students from this case study are enrolled in a combination of different majors/minors that are unrelated to each other such as Psychology and Human Resource Management (Rebecca), History and German Studies (Sarah), or Music and Psychology (Eliza), they indicated that it can be difficult to understand the roles and responsibilities for each co-op program if the expectation from students “significantly varies” in each program, as phrased

by Daisy who is pursuing English, Entrepreneurship, and Psychology. Daisy indicated that the evaluation process is not standard across co-op programs in all fields of study. Another co-op participant, Rebecca stated that she received "conflicting advice" regarding the ranking and matching procedures of co-op programs from her departmental staff members. She further added that "co-op seems to run differently" for Psychology if one were to compare it with Human Resource Management, despite both being part of the Faculty of Arts. When prompted to elaborate on this issue, she mentioned that the learning outcomes (goals and objectives), the co-op program schedule (work flexibility), networking opportunities (e.g., social events, workshops, or training facilities), and the frequency of engagement with employer can vary widely.

Implications based on Arts Students' Responses[1]

The above responses of students suggest there could be a mismatch between what students expect from a co-op program theoretically and how it operates practically in the real-world, which is why it is important for students to align their expectations accordingly. Based on the low departmental and faculty support issue that students highlighted (see Chapter 8.5), it is possible that they are not receiving adequate amount of information or being prepared to approach co-op positions with a broader lens instead of expecting the same outcome from each WIL placement. While some of the WIL policies and practices can benefit from being more standardized such as the evaluation and assessment processes (e.g., the application/completion procedures of co-op, the minimum and maximum academic credits associated with co-op in each field, the duration and

[1]Please note that not all of these suggestions are empirically proven; these are simply the recommendations that I am providing based on my interpretations of Arts students' responses (not their direct quotations) and based on other external resources (e.g., Business/Higher Education Council (BHER), 2015; Co-operative Education Manual, 2015; Co-operative Education & Work-Integrated Learning (CEWIL), 2021; Erdem & Toklu, 2016; RBC Career Development Foundation, 2016). Section 9.4 provides recommendations of policies and practices that Arts students have explicitly suggested which are more representative of their viewpoints.

frequency of co-op terms)[2], the other factors may be difficult to standardize. For example, the specific elements of co-op that are related to each workplace, company, or employer may not be feasible for post-secondary institutions to monitor or standardize. Therefore, although standardizing the evaluation and assessment policies/practices in WIL can potentially enhance the WIL experience of students, it is nonetheless crucial to train them for the adversities and diversities of work-integrated learning programs.

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[2]These are some of the suggestions discussed by a few Arts students from this case study.

9.3 Implementation of WIL Programs

In this case study, when students were asked whether work-integrated learning programs should be implemented as a mandatory or optional practice in post-secondary education, 46 out of 50 students (92% of the sample population) have indicated that it should remain an optional practice in post-secondary education. Despite the numerous benefits associated with WIL programs that students have listed (see Chapter 6: *Benefits of WIL Programs*), students indicated that WIL programs can "increase the workload," "add more academic pressure," and "extend the duration of a post-secondary degree" which can potentially hinder students' "mental health and psychological well-being" (Jay; Krivon; Austin; Veronia). Other students have echoed the same reasons for choosing to keep work-integrated learning as an optional program for all students regardless of their field of study.

Although students have indicated that they prefer WIL programs to remain an optional choice, they would like to have access to WIL programs in their post-secondary education if they

choose to enroll in them at their own discretion. For instance, one of the co-op students, Yara, stated that "co-op should be a choice, like if students want to participate in it, they should have the opportunity to do so." Similarly, another student Melody added that "work combined with learning programs [WIL] should be available for all students, not just STEM students but for Arts students in PSE [post-secondary education]. Melody's recommendation that WIL should be available for all students is widely proposed in contemporary sociological literature as well (BHER, 2015; Li, 2016; Jackson & Collings, 2018; Martin & Rouleau, 2020).

9.4 Future Recommendations for WIL in Arts Programs

From the perspectives of Arts students in this case study, the following are the common recommendations of policies and practices for post-secondary institutions which students suggest can overcome the challenges associated with work-integrated learning programs, while enhancing the transitional process from school-to-work. It is also important to note that Arts students have indicated that some of these recommendations regarding WIL policies and practices may be difficult to implement. For example, one of co-op student, Avery stated "I don't know if monthly workshops can be held, I mean it may be a lot of work but it will be good for us [Arts students] for sure." This viewpoint suggests that students recognize that not all policies or practices can be easily adopted, nonetheless they suggest that the policies/practices listed below can benefit Arts students if implemented and exercised systematically.

1) **Insufficient Exposure and Awareness:** To overcome the challenge of lack of exposure and awareness of WIL programs in the Faculty of Arts, emails should be frequently sent to Arts students. Flyers, brochures, or other forms of information booklets should be handed out during orientation events in Arts programs for greater WIL publicity.

2) **Limited WIL Programs for Arts Students:** To increase the availability and accessibility of WIL programs for Arts students, post-secondary institutions should survey Arts students on a yearly basis to identify the type of WIL opportunities that they are seeking and expand their partnerships with potential employers in order to mutually construct more WIL opportunities for Arts students.

3) **Low Departmental & Faculty Support:** Host program-specific, department-specific, and faculty-specific workshops and/or events on WIL programs twice a year[1] that are designed for Arts students in which prospective employers and co-op alumni should be invited to help students build connections and expand their networking opportunities.

4) **Lack of Field-Specific WIL Placements:** To tackle this issue, post-secondary institutions should implement an optional, standardized WIL opportunity for all students within the Faculty of Arts which should have a concrete set of criteria, rules, and regulations regarding the evaluation and assessment processes (e.g., the application and completion procedures, the minimum/maximum academic credits associated with each field, the duration and frequency of co-op terms).

[1]While some students have suggested monthly workshops, others have suggested per term or twice a year. Since students have also mentioned the challenges of hosting workshops regularly (see page 133), I have chosen to present the number which is less frequent (twice a year).

9.5 Theoretical Application: Policies and Practices in WIL

The findings regarding the policies and practices that Arts student recommend support the first proposition of human capital theory which states: *Work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education is an economic investment which can increase the employability of graduates, resulting in a smoother school-to-work transition.* Based on this proposition of the human capital theory, work-integrated learning can improve the productivity and efficacy levels of graduates when they enter the labour market (Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019; Sweetland, 1996). Through work-integrated learning programs, students can increase their employability and marketability as well as meet the expectations of employers (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Martin & Rouleau, 2020; Sattler & Peters, 2012). This proposition, WIL as an economic investment, corresponds with Arts students' recommendations which are all catered to increasing the employability of graduates. For example, students suggested raising the exposure and awareness level of WIL programs, availability and accessibility of WIL programs for Arts students, departmental and faculty support, and field-specific WIL placements. These recommendations can potentially lead to a higher participation in WIL among Arts students which can help them prepare for the labour market as well as meet the demands of employers, leading to a smoother school-to-work-transition. Participating in WIL in order to increase graduate employability is essentially an economic investment that can lead to financial gains and labour market success post-graduation, and thus, the recommendations of Arts students to increase the graduate employability precisely overlaps with the first proposition of human capital theory that also considers WIL as an economic investment for labour market success.

CHAPTER 9:
SUMMARY OF WIL POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Chapter 9 provided information on WIL policies and practices that Arts students have suggested. For instance, Arts students indicated that there is a lack of standardized WIL procedures across different fields of study, making it difficult for students to understand how these programs operate in post-secondary institutions. This is specifically problematic for students who are pursing a combination of majors/minors that are unrelated to each other such as Music and Psychology, or History and German Studies. Students' responses suggest that there could be a mismatch between what students expect from a co-op program and how it actually operates in the real-world. Students have also indicated that despite the benefits associated with WIL programs, it can increase the workload, academic pressure, and the duration of a post-secondary degree which can potentially hinder their mental health and well-being, and thus, they recommend that WIL should remain an optional practice instead of being a mandatory requirement to complete a post-secondary degree. In addition to this suggestion, students have also provided specific recommendations for each of the challenges discussed in Chapter 8 and 9.2 such as increasing awareness of WIL programs through higher communication and publicity among Arts students, expanding partnerships with potential employers, standardizing the evaluation and assessment procedures of WIL, and hosting WIL workshops and events that are specifically designed for Arts students. Since Arts students' recommendations are all catered to increasing the employability of graduates, it supports the first proposition of the human capital theory which perceives WIL as an economic investment for the labour market that can help students become more equipped and employable while meeting the demands of employers in the evolving labour market.

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUDING REMARKS

10.1 Main Findings and Contributions

Perceptions of WIL

RQ1: *How do Faculty of Arts students perceive the relationship between work-integrated learning programs and labour market outcomes post-graduation?*

- Arts students perceive work-integrated learning programs to have a positive impact on labour market outcomes post-graduation, emphasizing that WIL programs increase the chance of labour market success. More precisely, 48 out of the 50 students, which is 96% of the participants consider WIL to be relevant regardless of their field of study.
- Among the Arts students interviewed in this case study, co-op students demonstrated a higher level of awareness and understanding of WIL based on greater exposure and experience with WIL through their co-op placements.
- When the perceived value of WIL experience was compared within Arts versus non-Arts programs (e.g., STEM), students who are majoring non-conventional Arts programs such as Accounting, Finance, and Economics consider the relevance of WIL to be same or similar in both Arts and non-Arts programs. In contrast, students who are pursing traditional Arts programs such as Sociology, Psychology, and History predict that WIL experiences are likely to benefit Arts students more who tend to experience greater challenges than non-Arts students due to the stigma attached with Arts degree.
- Despite the variations in perspectives among Arts students from different fields of study, the majority of them have stated that there is an increasing soft-skills gap between higher education and employment which can be bridged through participation in WIL programs as it can help students develop the necessary skills for the labour market.

Benefits of WIL

RQ 2a: *According to Arts students, what are the key benefits of participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education?*

- As per Arts students, some of the key benefits of participating in WIL are associated with *human capital growth.* Students mentioned that WIL programs can assist in terms of expanding one's human capital by providing opportunities: i) to improve and develop interpersonal qualities; ii) to enhance their understanding of workplace culture through real-world exposure; iii) and to explore different career options at an early stage when the stakes of making errors are lower.
- According to Arts students, other key benefits of participating in WIL correspond with graduate employability. Students highlighted that WIL programs can help to increase graduate employability in the following three ways: i) building a professional portfolio; ii) forming new connections and expanding networks with prospective employers; iii) developing the necessary work ethics through work placements.

RQ 2b: *What are the transferable soft-skills that Arts students have developed and/or expect to develop through work-integrated learning programs to better prepare themselves for the labour market?*

In this case study, when students were asked about the transferable skills that they have developed or expect to develop, the co-op students discussed a combination of practical and theoretical skills (see Table 3 on page 109 - both columns) which they have developed from their current and former work placements. The list of practical skills includes demonstrating analytical competencies, executing leadership traits, meeting workplace expectations, staying updated with current labour market trends, being able to work with diverse people, and persevering diligently by navigating the complexities of modern workforce. On the other hand, the transferable soft-skills that non co-op students described (communication, critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving,

time-management, and quick learner) had an underlying theoretical notion as they were using terms such as “knowing” the skill or “understanding” how to apply the skill (see Table 3 on page 109 – right column). However, co-op students described some of these theoretical skills from a practical perspective using concrete examples of how they have demonstrated critical thinking, problem solving, or teamwork skills during their co-op placements.

Challenges of WIL

RQ3: *According to Arts students, what are the common challenges associated with participating in work-integrated learning programs in post-secondary education?*

- In terms of the common challenges that are associated with participating in work-integrated learning programs, the non co-op and co-op students encountered different types of barriers and reflected upon their individualistic experiences in post-secondary education.
- The non co-op students voiced their concerns regarding the insufficient exposure and awareness of WIL as an educational model in post-secondary institutions which resulted in their lack of participation.
- The co-op students expressed that there are limited field-specific co-op placements as well as low departmental and faculty support, which made the process of seeking and securing co-op positions particularly challenging.
- Both groups of students have expressed that there is a shortage of WIL opportunities for Arts students specifically, though they have indicated that the University of Waterloo has relatively more co-op programs across all fields of study in comparison to other universities and colleges.

Policies and Practices of WIL

RQ4: *Which WIL policies or practices do Arts students recommend for post-secondary institutions that can potentially improve their school-to-work transitions?*

- In relation to WIL policies and practices, Arts students indicated that there is a lack of standardized WIL procedures across different fields of study, making it difficult for students to understand how these programs operate in post-secondary education. This is particularly problematic for students who are pursing a combination of majors/minors that are unrelated to each other such as Music and Psychology or History and German Studies.

- Students have indicated that despite the benefits associated with WIL programs, it can increase the workload, academic pressure, and the duration of a post-secondary degree which can potentially hinder their mental health and well-being, and thus, they recommend that WIL should remain an optional practice instead of it being a mandatory requirement to complete post-secondary degree.

- Four key recommendations have been provided by Arts students: i) increasing awareness of WIL programs through higher communication and publicity among Arts students; ii) expanding partnerships with potential employers, iii) standardizing the evaluation and assessment procedures of WIL; iv) and hosting WIL workshops and events twice a year that are specifically designed for Arts students.

10.2 Key Theoretical Findings

This case study was grounded on three dominating theories in sociological literature concerning the topic of work-integrated learning which are: *Human Capital Theory* (HCT), *Credentialism*, and *Situated Learning Theory* (SLT) (Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Walters, 2004; Khampirat, Pop, & Bandaranaike, 2019). Each theory perceives WIL in its own distinctive way. For instance, HCT views WIL as an economic investment for financial gains in the labour market and as a human capital development technique, while credential theorists view it as a by-product of educational expansions and as a supplementary micro-credential. SLT, on the other hand, perceives WIL as an effective method of skills acquisition and as a dual learning opportunity. Among these various propositions, the perceptions of Arts students in this case study primarily resembled with HCT's first proposition of WIL being an economic investment for the labour market as students highlighted the positive implications of WIL on job market outcomes post-graduation throughout their responses in the interview. In other words, from a holistic analysis, the common perspective among Arts students is that WIL is predominantly an economic investment because it can help them find a job after graduation, and thus, they perceive WIL as having positive financial implications in the future and favourable labour market outcomes. This is because WIL can help students develop soft-skills, gain relevant work experience, and prepare them for the labour market which can ultimately help them in the process of seeking and securing a position in their field of study. Therefore, similar to human capital theorists, Arts students perceive WIL to be an economic investment that is associated with labour market success.

10.3 Project Limitations

In this thesis project, I have used a qualitative research approach consisting of a case study and semi-structured interviews since the research problem, questions, and objectives of my project required an-in depth understanding of Art students' perceptions of WIL programs using a sample population from a reputable work-integrated learning institution, such as the University of Waterloo which is the world's largest co-op institution (Co-operative Education Manual, 2015). Despite selecting a relevant research site and appropriate methodological approach, this project is not limitation-free. Since this project involved analyzing the perceptions of 50 Arts students using a case study, I acknowledge that the findings are "context-dependent," and thus, the results cannot be used to represent the viewpoints of the entire population of Arts students in Ontario, and rather the findings from this project should be used as a vehicle to understand the role of WIL programs and its potential implications on school-to-work transitions. Moreover, among the 50 participants, 42 were co-op students while the remaining 8 were from the non co-op stream, which further limits the representative power of this study, especially regarding the non co-op students' viewpoints due to the low sample size. Regardless of not being able to use the findings as a representative sample for a wider population of Arts students in Ontario, my project presented noteworthy findings on WIL programs. For this reason, the findings from this project may be of interest to the University of Waterloo as well as policymakers and educators from other institutions who are seeking strong examples of established work-integrated learning programs to model changes in their education systems.

Another limitation that may have occurred unknowingly during the data collection or data analysis processes is researcher bias which can hinder the creditability of the findings (Chenail, 2011). As Queiros, Faria, and Almeida (2017) noted, in qualitative research, "the researcher is

both the subject and the object of his research" (p. 370), hence unintended errors can take place in the research process or in the interpretation of the results. To mitigate this type of bias, a reflexive approach has been applied—a continuous re-evaluation of responses and impressions throughout the study period to ensure that preconceived assumptions are kept at bay (Shah, 2019). Moreover, I have also addressed the methodological considerations and limitations in-depth in Chapter 4.3 (*Research Design*). In addition, I have completed the data analysis component of this case study through systematic qualitative coding, and the findings in this project have been carefully presented in a way that does not mislead the readers. Furthermore, a detailed consent form was provided to participants which included a project overview, the research objectives, and other pertinent information. Having informed consent was a critical component in my qualitative research as it promoted participant autonomy, stimulated their trust and confidence in my case study, guaranteed anonymity and confidentially, as well as reduced any imbalances in the power relation between the researcher (myself) and respondents that may have emerged or influenced the responses of the participants (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Roache, 2014).

Aside from the researcher bias, another limitation of this project is regarding the data from semi-structured interviews in which participants may have provided socially desirable answers that are conventional in nature which can affect the accuracy of the research findings (Grimm, 2010; Krumpal, 2013). Participants may have also altered their answers due to the awareness of being studied, known as the 'Hawthorne effect', though it is more common in research involving empirical observations (McCambridge et al., 2014). Although there was no way to entirely eliminate these limitations in a research study, the effect has been mitigated as I was mindful throughout the interviewing process (Luttrell, 2019). I have also ensured that I do not provide any verbal or non-verbal cues during the interviews that may depict my perceptions regarding the

matter of inquiry since the goal is to learn the participants' perspectives, not provide my own.

Other common biases of semi-structured interviews can include leading questions and wording bias that prompt participants in the direction of favourable responses (Shah, 2019). To avoid this type of bias, I have asked open-ended questions that allowed participants to answer as per their comfort level. Additionally, the questions were kept simple and straightforward to prevent participants from potentially misinterpreting them. Participants also had the freedom to skip questions, partially answer them, or opt out of the interview at any point of time as responding to questions was entirely voluntary. Lastly, a critical limitation of this study is that although students have offered their perceptions on work-integrated learning, post-secondary institutional training, and potential labour market implications, they cannot provide evidence of actual labour market conditions. For instance, some of the students depicted concern while speaking about finding employment in their field of study. However, in the real world, these may be mere perceptions and their concerns may not actually translate into their employment outcomes post-graduation. In other words, students' perceptions do not necessarily reflect the accurate labour market outcomes, though their perceptions have provided invaluable data to understand the role of WIL programs in school-to-work transitions, the benefits and challenges associated with WIL programs, the practical and theoretical transferable skills that can be gained through WIL programs, as well as the policies and practices that Arts students recommended to post-secondary institutions which can ultimately bridge the soft skills gap between higher education and employment.

10.4 Future Directions

Potential Publications

Given the extensive data (542 pages of Otter.ai transcripts) from 50 one-on-one in-depth interviews, there is sufficient data to submit at least two articles for potential journal publications. The first article will be a shorter version of this project while focusing on the differences between co-op versus non co-op Arts students' perspectives, which I plan to submit to the *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*. The second article will be a comparative qualitative analysis on the experiences of co-op students who are from traditional Arts fields (e.g., Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology) versus non-conventional Arts programs (e.g., Accounting, Finance, Economics). This second article will essentially be an extension of the findings from Chapter 6.2, and I plan to submit this to the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education.*

Longitudinal Study

This case study focused on the perceptions of the 4th-year Arts undergraduates regarding work-integrated learning and its potential implications on labour market outcomes. One of the eligibility criteria of this case study was that the students must be planning to enter the labour market within 0 to 6 months post-graduation. In summer of 2024, it will be over 6 months since the time the majority of the participants would have entered the labour market. Thus, conducting a longitudinal study at the 6 to 12 months margin as well as a follow-up at the 2-year mark would be an ideal option as it can reveal whether the perception of Arts students regarding WIL programs transformed into reality, and whether the impact of WIL is different at 6 to 12 months into the labour market versus 2+ years of being in the workforce.

A Mixed-Method Doctoral Study (PhD)

Since this research project is a case study on Arts students from the University of Waterloo, it is not representative of a greater population of Arts students in Ontario. To expand the scope of this study, I will be conducting a mixed-method thesis project during my PhD program on the role of work-integrated learning and its implications on labour market outcomes. The doctoral project will involve a larger sample population of students from five different Ontario universities. The sample population will also include both Arts and non-Arts students as I plan to do a comparative analysis between the two groups of students. I also plan to include the viewpoints of faculty and staff members from the co-op office of each institution to investigate the consistency in expectations and perspectives between co-op students and co-op staff. The mixed-method project will replicate an explanatory sequential research design in which quantitative surveys will be conducted and statistically analyzed using Stata software first, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews which will be coded using NVivo software in order to ensure methodological rigor and higher transferability of the research findings compared to this case study.

CHAPTER 10:
SUMMARY OF CONCLUDING REMARKS

Chapter 10 was divided into three parts, and each served a distinctive purpose. In the first part, I have listed out the four research questions (RQ) and presented the key findings that are associated with each RQ in a point-form manner to help readers grasp them quickly at a glance. This section also included key theoretical findings which is: Among the different propositions of the three theories discussed in this thesis project (human capital theory, credentialism, and situated learning theory), the perceptions of Arts students in this case study closely resembled with human capital theory's first proposition that perceives WIL as an economic investment for the labour market. Students' perceptions matched this proposition as they also consider WIL as an economic investment because it can improve the productivity and efficacy levels of graduates when they enter the labour market. The second part of Chapter 10 provided detailed information on the project limitations such as how the findings of this project are "context-dependent," and thus, the results cannot be used to represent the viewpoints of the entire population of Arts students in Ontario, and rather the findings should be used as a vehicle to understand the role of WIL programs and its potential implications on school-to-work transitions. I have also addressed the issues of having an uneven sample size of 42 co-op students versus 8 non co-op students as well as the implications of various types of biases (e.g., researcher bias, social desirability bias, leading question bias, and other common biases associated with interviews). Along with detailing the limitations, I have also explained how I have tackled each issue and mitigated the effects of biases. In the final section of this chapter, I provided information on future directions such as potential publications, plans of conducting a longitudinal study with the same sample group from this case study to identify whether their perceptions translated into reality, as well as plans of extending this study into my PhD program by transforming it from a case study to a multi-method investigation involving many five Ontario post-secondary institutions to increase the creditability and transferability power of the findings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Title of the Study: Bridging the Soft-Skills Gap between Canadian Postsecondary Education and Employment through Work-Integrated Learning: A Case Study on Arts Students.

Sample Population: 4th-year of undergraduate program from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo who plan to attend the labour market within 6 months of graduation.

Interview Duration: Approximately 45 – 60 minutes

Introductory Remarks

- Welcome message and a brief introduction of who I am (e.g., Master's student).
- Review the objectives of the research project and answer any questions that participants may have.
- Briefly remind the participant that their participation is voluntary, and their identity will be kept confidential.
- Inform the participant about the audio recording before pressing the "record" button.

Start Recording

- Introduction of the participant: Can you tell me a little about your current program at the University of Waterloo?
    a) *Probe:* Are you in the co-op or non co-op stream?

Knowledge and Awareness of WIL Programs

1. Prior to enrolling in your current program, did you have any knowledge about work-integrated learning programs?
    a. *Probe:* Whether you ended up selecting co-op or not, did having it as an option play any role in your decision for choosing your current institution?
    b. *Probe:* If yes, was it the primary deciding factor?

2. Do you think there is enough exposure and awareness of work-integrated learning opportunities at the University of Waterloo for Arts students? What about other post-secondary institutions in Ontario?
    a. *Probe:* After enrollment in your current institution, have you engaged in contents related to work-integrated learning such as reading an article, browsing websites, or discussing with family and friends?

b. *Probe*: Now that you are in your 4th-year of study, what do you know about work-integrated learning programs that you weren't aware of before?

Perceptions & Experiences of WIL Programs

3. For Co-op: What are some of the key benefits of the WIL program based on your experiences?
    a. *Probe:* What are some of the transferable skills that you have developed or expect to develop through the WIL programs?

    For Non Co-op: What are some of the key benefits of WIL in general?

    a. *Probe:* What are some of the transferable skills that can be developed through WIL programs?

4. For Co-op: What are some of the key challenges of the WIL programs based on your experiences?

    For Non Co-op: What are some of the key challenges of WIL programs in general?

5. Do you think students learn better in classroom settings or through hands-on experiences, or a combination of both? Please explain your rationale.
    a. *Probe:* What are the advantages/disadvantages of having theorical versus practice-based learning? Is one more important than the other?

6. Do you consider work-integrated learning (WIL) programs to be relevant in terms of finding employment post-graduation?
    a. *Probe:* Do you think WIL can impact the employability of students post-graduation?
    b. *Probe:* How is WIL related (or not) to graduate employability?

7. In your perspective, do co-op or non co-op students have a higher chance of finding a job in their field of study? Why or why not?

Perceptions of the Labour Market

8. What are the interpersonal qualities (e.g., characteristics and traits) that employers seek from new graduates when making hiring decisions?
    a. *Probe:* Do you think the expectations of employers are different for Arts versus non-Arts students?
    b. *Probe:* Do you think the value of work-integrated learning programs differ for Arts versus non-Arts degree holders in the labour market? Why or why not?

9. What are some of the challenges that new graduates may experience when transitioning from post-secondary institution to the labour market?
    a. *Probe:* Are these challenges ongoing or do they only occur during the initial phase of entering the labour market? How can graduates overcome these challenges?

b. *Probe:* Do you think Arts students face different challenges compared to non-Arts students?

10. What are the some of the key factors that can help students succeed in the labour market post-graduation?
    a. *Probe:* Do these factors apply equally to Arts students?
    b. *Probe:* How relevant is a bachelor's degree versus previous work experience to navigate the labour market? Is one more important than the other?

The Role of Post-Secondary Institutions

11. In your perspective, is there a gap between how post-secondary institutions are preparing their students and what employers are seeking from new graduates? Please explain your rationale.
    a. *Probe*: Reflecting on your current program at the University of Waterloo, is there a gap between how students are being trained versus what employers are seeking from new graduates? Please explain your rationale.

12. What are the transferable skills that you have learned in your post-secondary education which you can use when you enter the labour market?
    a. *Probe:* Did anything in specific help you gain those skills?

13. Overall, do you feel satisfied with the education you received in your current institution, or do you feel that there is room for improvement?
    a. *Probe:* Are there any resources or services that helped you succeed in this current program?
    b. *Probe:* Are these resources or services catered to Arts students?

Policies and Practices in Post-Secondary Education

14. In your perspective, do Arts students in post-secondary institutions currently have adequate number of work-integrated learning opportunities?

15. As an Arts student, what educational policies and/or training opportunities do you desire that can increase your ability to find employment in your field of study?
    a. *Probe:* Do you have any recommendations specifically for the University of Waterloo and/or post-secondary institutions in general regarding how to best support Arts students in terms of school-to-work transitions? How can post-secondary institutions implement these?
    b. *Probe:* What can Arts students do themselves to prepare for the labour market?

16. If you could advice Arts students who are deciding on whether to choose co-op or not, which option would you recommend them? Why or why not?
    a. *Probe:* Would you recommend work-integrated learning in post-secondary education to be implemented as a mandatory or optional practice for all programs?

Thank you for taking the time to share your perceptions of work-integrating learning and its implications on the labour market. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B: Letter of Information & Consent Form

Title of the Study: Bridging the Soft-Skills Gap between Canadian Postsecondary Education and Employment through Work-Integrated Learning: A Case Study on Arts Students.

Student Investigator: Mrittika Dreesha, MA, Department of Sociology & Legal Studies, University of Waterloo (ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca)

Research Supervisor: Janice Aurini, PhD, Department of Sociology & Legal Studies, University of Waterloo (jaurini@uwaterloo.ca)

Overview: This research project intends to investigate the perceptions of Arts students in regard to the relationship between work-integrated learning in Canadian post-secondary education and labour market outcomes post-graduation. To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, this letter will outline the details of the study, the possible risks, the potential benefits, and your rights as a participant. If you do not understand any component in this letter, feel free to reach out to Mrittika Dreesha prior to consenting to the study. Please print/save a copy of this letter for your records.

What is the study about?

You are being asked to participate in a research study that analyzes Arts students' thoughts and opinions of work-integrated learning programs in Canadian post-secondary education and how it relates to finding employment after graduation. Although contemporary literature has identified a strong relationship between work-integrated learning and post-graduation employment, the focus on Arts students in Canadian post-secondary education is lacking which this study aims to fulfill.

What is the purpose of this study?

By understanding the perspectives of Arts students, specific post-secondary educational training facilities and policy recommendations can be suggested that cater to this affected population. This can improve their transition from post-secondary institutions to the labour market, as well as contribute to an overall decline in the unemployment rate among Arts students in Canada. The findings from this Canadian study can also be utilized in American or other non-Canadian literature for comparative analysis purposes.

Your Role as a Participant

Eligibility Requirements: Who may participate in the study?

For the purpose of this research study, 4th-year undergraduate students from both co-op and non co-op steams within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo are welcome to participate, if they are planning to enter the labour market after graduation as they will be the most suitable participants for investigating school-to-work transitions.

How can I participate?

One-on-One Interviews: an online one-on-one interview will be conducted over Zoom, and it will be recorded with your consent. Recordings over Zoom consist of both audio and video by default, but only the audio will be used for the purposes of transcription. The video recording will be deleted immediately after the audio version is downloaded onto a password-protected laptop.

Each interview is anticipated to take approximately 45 – 60 minutes. The interview is divided into four sections. The first part of the interview will begin with a discussion about your current program such as the name of your program and whether it is a co-op or non co-op stream. In this first part, you will also be asked to provide a brief overview of your background knowledge of work-integrated learning programs *before* and *after* enrolling in post-secondary education.

In the second part of the interview, you will be asked questions about your perceptions of work-integrated learning programs and of labour market outcomes post-graduation. The third part of the interview will involve questions about preparation for employment after graduating and receiving your bachelor's degree. The final part is surrounding policies and practices that you would recommend to post-secondary institutions to help students easily and effectively transition into the workforce.

Your Rights as a Participant

Is participation in the study voluntary?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions as per your preference. You may also end the interview at anytime and exit the Zoom meeting if you choose to.

Will I receive anything for participating in the study?

Participants will be compensated for their time. Each participant will be compensated with a $15.00 remuneration for their time. This amount will be e-transferred to you after the completion of the interview. The remuneration amount received is taxable. It is your responsibility to report this amount for income tax purposes.

What are the possible benefits of the study?

Although participation in this study will not provide any personal benefit to you, this study may allow you to further reflect on your decision to choose work-integrated learning programs such as co-op, internships, fieldwork, or other hands-on placements. At a broader level, the results of this study are anticipated to make valuable contributions in several areas because there is a sizable gap in our scholarly and institutional understanding of how Arts students perceive and plan school-to-work transitions in Canada. In particular, Arts students' perspectives on the relationship between work-integrated learning opportunities in post-secondary institutions and labour market outcomes post-graduation is lacking. While our American counterparts have analyzed this topic to a small extent, methodological limitations persist, and findings are not necessarily generalizable to the Canadian context due to distinctions between the two higher education systems. Therefore, this study proposes an ambitious review and qualitative design that will provide an in-depth examination of the perspectives of work-integrated learning programs among Arts students in Canada. As mentioned earlier, by understanding the perspectives of Arts students, specific post-secondary policy recommendations and training facilities can be proposed that cater to this affected group. This can improve their school-to-work transition, as well as contribute to an overall decline in the unemployment rate among Arts students in Canada.

What are the risks associated with the study?

As I am investigating Arts students' perceptions of the relationship between work-integrated learning and labour market outcomes, I will be asking questions surrounding these topics to learn about your perspectives. During this process, it is possible that reflecting on these matters may cause you to feel psychological or emotional discomfort, especially if you have encountered negative experiences at your institution or program. If this occurs, you may decline to respond to any questions that you prefer not to answer.

Privacy, Data Retention and Storage

Your participation will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any research outputs such as scholarly articles, institutional reports, or any publications resulting from this study, however, with your consent, quotations may be used with a pseudonym in place of your real name. Identifying information will be removed from the data that is collected and will be stored separately until the completion of the Major Research Paper (MRP). The maximum completion date for the MRP is by the end of the Winter 2023 term (April 30, 2023). After this date, your identifying information will be permanently deleted.

Please note that you may withdraw your consent and request for your data (e.g., responses) to be deleted by contacting me within 1 month after your interview date. After this timeframe, it will not be possible to remove your data (e.g., your responses) because I will start data analysis process and begin writing the final version of the MRP. Thus, once the data analysis and write-up processes begin, it will be difficulty to identify which responses belong to you as all the responses will undergo two cycles of coding on NVivo software and will be organized thematically.

In terms of storage of the data, after the completion of each interview on the Zoom platform, the audio recording of the interview will be downloaded to my password-protected laptop as I am the student investigator and it deleted from the Zoom account. Please note that Zoom has implemented technical, administrative, and physical safeguards to protect the information provided via the services from loss, misuse, and unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, or destruction. However, it is important to acknowledge that no Internet transmission is ever fully secure or error free.

After the recording is downloaded to my password-protected laptop, it will be uploaded to the research project Dropbox which will be only accessible to me, the student investigator (Mrittika Dreesha), as well as the research supervisor (Dr. Janice Aurini). This is the only place where the audio recording will be stored until it gets permanently deleted after the completion of my Major Research Paper (MRP). As mentioned earlier, the maximum completion date of my MRP is by the end of the Winter 2023 term (April 30, 2023).

Afterward, from my password-protected laptop, the audio recording of each interview will be uploaded to my personal Otter.ai account for transcription. This account is only accessible by me (the student investigator); the account credentials will not be shared with anyone else. After the interview recording is uploaded to the research project Dropbox and my personal Otter.ai account, the recording will be permanently deleted from my password-protected laptop. Please note that whenever information is transmitted over the internet privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk your responses may be

intercepted by a third party (e.g., government agencies, hackers). For more information on Otter.ai's privacy policy, please see here.

Once the interview transcription on the Otter.ai account is completed, each transcript will be assigned a participant code and/or a pseudonym. This identifying information will be recorded manually in the key/master list that will be separately kept in a folder (isolated from the rest of the data) within the research project Dropbox. After the transcription of each interview, the de-identified transcript that now contains a participant code and/or pseudonym will be uploaded to the research project Dropbox. As mentioned earlier, this Dropbox is only accessible to the student investigator (Mrittika Dreesha) and the research supervisor (Dr. Janice Aurini) to maintain privacy and confidentiality. After the de-identified transcript is uploaded to the research project Dropbox, it will be deleted from the Otter.ai account.

During the data analysis period, the de-identified transcript will be uploaded from the research project Dropbox to NVivo software for analysis. The audio recording of the interview will be deleted from NVivo once the data analysis procedure is completed and the final write-up is submitted by the maximum completion date of Winter 2023 term (April 30, 2023). The de-identified transcripts will be securely stored in the password protected Dropbox for a maximum of 7 years. With your permission, your de-identified data may also be used in future research on this topic and/or in other future research projects including collaborations with other researchers.

Questions, Comments or Concerns

Has the study received ethics clearance?

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #44526). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca.

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding my participation in the study?

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact the student investigator (Mrittika Dreesha - ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca) or the research supervisor (Dr. Janice Aurini – jaurini@uwaterloo.ca).

I'm interested in this study, what are my next steps?

1. Confirm that you consent to participate by filling out the attached Letter of Information and Consent Form (use check mark or the 'bold' feature). On the form, you have the option to provide written or verbal consent, so please indicate your preference. If verbal consent option is chosen, your consent will be taken prior to starting the interview.
2. Make sure to type your name and date on the signature line at the end of the last page. Email me the signed copy of the consent form at Mrittika Dreesha: ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca

Consent Section

By providing your consent, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

Confirm that you consent to this request by checking boxes and using the **'bold'** feature to indicate your responses, as well as typing your name and date on the signature line in the Consent Form below.

Title of the Study: Bridging the Soft-Skills Gap between Postsecondary Education and Employment through Work-Integrated Learning: A Case Study on Arts Students in Canada.

☐ I have read the information presented above about the study being conducted by Mrittika Dreesha, Department of Sociology & Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers, and any additional information that I have requested was provided to me.

☐ I am aware that the data gathered from this research will be used in the student investigator, Mrittika Dreesha's Major Research Paper (MRP). I give permission for my de-identified data to be used in future research on this topic and/or in all other future research projects including collaborations with other researchers.

☐ I consent to be audio/video recorded on Zoom platform to ensure an accurate recording of my responses. I am aware that the recorded audio will be uploaded to Otter.ai, NVivo, and Dropbox for transcription, data analysis, and data retention/storage.

☐ I have read the privacy, retention, and storage sections of this information letter. Thus, I am aware of how my identity will be kept confidential in the research outputs and I agree to the use of direct quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this study with the understanding that a pseudonym will be used in place of my real name.

☐ I have been informed of my right to withdraw from the research study *before* and *during* the interview by notifying Mrittika Dreesha. If I choose to withdraw my responses from the study *after* the interview, I understand that I have a period of 1 month to request that my data be removed from the study by notifying Mrittika Dreesha via email (ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca).

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, on my own free will, to participate in this study.
☐ YES ☐ NO

I would like to receive a summary of the study findings when they become available.
☐ YES ☐ NO

Verbal Consent Section

☐ **I am opting out of written consent as I prefer to provide verbal consent prior to the interview.**
[ ] Verbal consent was obtained *(student investigator/researcher use only)*

Participant's Full Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature:_____

Date: _____

For any questions or inquiries, please contact the student investigator (Mrittika Dreesha: ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca) or the research supervisor (Dr. Janice Aurini: jaurini@uwaterloo.ca).

Sincerely,

Mrittika Dreesha
MA Student, Sociology
Department of Sociology & Legal Studies
University of Waterloo
Email: ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Subject Line - Action Requested: Participation in Research Project

Dear 4th-year undergraduate student,

I am a Master's student in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Dr. Janice Aurini. I am conducting a research study on Arts students' perspectives of work-integrated learning (WIL) programs in post-secondary education such as co-op, internships, fieldwork, and other hands-on placements. The purpose of this study is to a) understand Arts students' thoughts and opinions of WIL programs, b) learn how WIL relates to finding employment post-graduation, and c) offer policy recommendations and suggest specific training facilities in order to improve school-to-work transitions which may also contribute to an overall decline in unemployment rate among Arts undergraduates.

Who is eligible to participate?

I am seeking 4th-year undergraduate students in either co-op or non co-op programs from the Faculty of Arts, who are planning to find employment within 0-6 months after receiving their undergraduate degree. If you fall into this category of students, you would be a suitable candidate for my research project. In Canada, we do not have a large body of qualitative data on Arts students' perceptions of the relationship between work-integrated learning and securing employment post-graduation. My project intends to fill this gap in the current literature. Therefore, I kindly ask that you consider taking part in my research and help me achieve this goal.

How can you participate?

One-on-One Online Interview:

- Participation will involve taking part in a one-on-one online interview on the Zoom platform which is anticipated to last 45-60 minutes. You will receive $15.00 via e-transfer for your participation.

- While questions will surround school-to-work transitions in general, the focus will be on learning your perceptions of work-integrated learning programs, the advantages/disadvantages of being a co-op or non co-op student, how post-secondary institutions prepare students for the labour market, what employers seek from new graduates, and the policies or practices that you would recommend to universities and colleges which can help students develop the necessary skills to successfully navigate the labour market post-graduation.

I have attached a **Letter of Information and Consent Form** which further outlines what your participation would involve. If you have any additional questions or inquiries, please contact me via email (see below).

I'm interested in participating, now what?

1) Confirm that you consent to participate by filling out the attached Letter of Information and Consent Form (use a check mark or the '**bold**' feature). On the form, you have the option to provide written or verbal consent, so please indicate your preference. If the verbal consent option is chosen, your consent will be taken before starting the interview.

2) Make sure to sign the consent form at the end of the attached document and email the signed copy to me at **Mrittika Dreesha:** ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca.

After I receive your email, I will take the following steps:

- I will be in contact with you to arrange a suitable date and time for the online Zoom interview.
- I will answer any questions or inquiries that you may have regarding this research project.

Please note that this research project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB# 44526). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mrittika Dreesha
MA Student, Sociology
Department of Sociology & Legal Studies
University of Waterloo
Email: ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca

Appendix D: Reminder Email

*Note: To be sent to the participants 3 days prior to their interview.

Subject Line - Reminder: Participation in Research Project

Dear [participant's name],

This is a friendly reminder regarding your one-on-one interview for the research project, *Bridging the Soft-Skills Gap between Canadian Postsecondary Education and Employment through Work-Integrated Learning: A Case Study on Arts Students.*

Your interview is scheduled on the following date and time:

Date: _____
Time: _____

As mentioned in the 'Information Letter,' your interview will take place remotely on the Zoom platform. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the interview or the research project, please feel free to let me know prior to the interview via email.

Join Zoom Meeting
https://us06web.zoom.us/j/85602458960?pwd=RzRKNFd3Vlhjc25JV21NaEZKakJ2dz09

Meeting ID: 856 0245 8960
Passcode: 669388

Thank you for your time and contribution to this project.

Kind regards,
Mrittika

Mrittika Dreesha
MA Student, Sociology
Department of Sociology & Legal Studies
University of Waterloo
ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca

Appendix E: Thank You Email

Dear [participant's name],

I would like to thank you again for participating in my research project on Arts student's perceptions of the relationship between work-integrated learning and labour market outcomes post-graduation. As a research project, *Bridging the Soft-Skills Gap between Canadian Postsecondary Education and Employment through Work-Integrated Learning: A Case Study on Arts Students,* will help to fill a substantial gap in Canadian literature on the school-to-work transitions.

By understanding the perspectives of Arts students, specific post-secondary educational training facilities and policy recommendations can be suggested. This can improve their transition from post-secondary institutions to the labour market, as well as contribute to an overall decline in the unemployment rate among Arts students. The findings from this Canadian study can also be utilized in American or other non-Canadian literature for comparative analysis purposes.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that your identity will be kept confidential in the study results. Once all the data are collected and analyzed, I plan to start sharing the information with the research community through a variety of modes (scholarly articles, institutional feedback, and research presentations). If you indicated that you would like to see a summary of the research findings, I will be sending those when the project is completed. If you did not indicate it at that time but now would like to receive a copy of the findings, please let me know via email. I am anticipating that the maximum completion time for this research project is by the end of Winter 2023 term (April 30, 2023); the findings will be available at that time as well.

Please note that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #44526). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca. For all other questions, please reach out to me at the following address: ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca.

Please provide your preferred email address for the $15 remuneration to be e-transferred to you for your time and contribution to my research project.

Thank you,

Mrittika Dreesha
MA Student, Sociology
Department of Sociology & Legal Studies
University of Waterloo
ma2drees@uwaterloo.ca