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Program Related Work Experience and Academic Success for Indigenous Post-Secondary Learners

By Whitney Wolfe

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Introduction

Work opportunities related to post-secondary students' programs of study can have a positive impact on students' success when they transition from post-secondary institutions across Canada into a career setting. Students seek out these co-op, internship, work, and research opportunities to help them define their career goals. The practical skills and experience that students gain from work experiences related to their field of study can generate many positive outcomes in terms of skill development, professionalism, and future employment (Jackel, 2011). Program related work experience (PRWE) has been shown to increase graduate employability in a number of ways. For example, PRWE can increase a student's confidence in a professional setting. Students who participate in PRWE also understand and appreciate the importance of employable skills. Finally, many students acknowledge PRWE as an introduction to the workplace where they can further improve their understanding of workplace culture and values. (Jackson, 2013). With PRWE, students aim to leverage hands-on experience in their field of study and gain valuable career-related information for their employment after graduation.

Often, Indigenous students will graduate from post-secondary institutions without hands on experience in their field of study, and without transferable skills that would help them in a professional setting. PRWE allows them an opportunity to develop these, such as communication in a professional setting, and profession-specific guidelines and information. Students also build networks with professionals in their field of study. Many researchers agree that PRWE can promote critical thinking skills, and, if carefully organized, can be relevant to students' professional career development and success (Watanabe, 2005).

With the results from the National Education Survey (NES) Indspire was able to investigate some of the outcomes that Indigenous students experienced after participating in PRWE.

The objectives of this study were to examine three components relating to those outcomes.

1. Is there a relationship between students who participated in PRWE and their employment outcomes?
2. Does PRWE impact whether students feel satisfied with their current employment opportunity?

3. Is there a relationship between students who participated in PRWE and annual income?

Data Collection and Analysis

In 2020, Indspire reached out to its Building Brighter Futures: Bursaries, Awards, and Scholarships (BBF) award recipients to learn more about their post-secondary experiences and to better understand BBF's impacts on Indigenous students.

A survey was administered to all BBF award recipients between 2013 and 2020, totaling 14,185 past recipients across Canada. Of these, 6,599 past recipients responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 47 percent.

Survey data was used to determine how many students participated in a work experience opportunity related to their field of study and also whether PRWE has a relationship with post-secondary students' employment outcome experiences.

To examine employment outcomes, only respondents who completed the program (n=2,247) were selected from the 6,599 respondents. These were then divided into two groups: those who completed PRWE and those who did not.

Of the 2,247 students who completed their program, 22 percent of students indicated that they had PRWE, and 78 percent of students indicated they had no PRWE.

Employment Outcomes and Program-Related Work Experience

From the survey data, we examined post-graduate employment outcomes for past BBF recipients who either participated in an optional work placement, co-op, or internship opportunity and/or gained work experience related to their field of study. We also examined post-graduate employment outcomes for past BBF recipients who did not participate in an optional work placement, co-op, or internship opportunity, they also did not gain work experience related to their field of study.

From the sample, we examined the percentage of past recipients who were employed after graduation, those who were not, and a description of employment rates for the former group. The following categories were included:

- Full-time (30 hours or more per week)
- Part-time (fewer than 30 hours per week)
- Not currently working, but seeking employment
- Not currently working, not seeking employment

Employment Satisfaction and Program-Related Work Experience

An analysis was conducted on the total number of students who provided feedback on different Likert scale questions to determine how satisfied past recipients were with their current employment. We looked into the responses for question 32 of the NES. The Likert scale question asked students to indicate how much they agreed with each of the following statements:

- On average, I am working the number of hours I desire per week
- I am satisfied with my current employment

Income and Program-Related Work Experience

In order to determine if there were any differences between the annual incomes of past BBF recipients we evaluated the annual income of individuals who either participated in PRWE or did not. We asked past recipients what their total annual employment income was and recorded the responses. This analysis did not include a comparison of fields of study or employment industry; please see the limitations section for more information.

Summary of Key Findings

Of the 6,599 respondents to the NES, 2,247 past BBF recipients indicated they had completed their program. Of the sample, 22 percent (n=505) of past recipients indicated that they had PRWE and 78 percent (n=1,742) indicated that they did not have PRWE. Because these past recipients completed their programs, it is expected that many would enter the workforce.

Past recipients who participated in PRWE were more likely to obtain full-time employment. For example, 80 percent of past recipients with PRWE indicated that they work 30 hours or more per week, while 10 percent responded that they are currently unemployed. Meanwhile, 70 percent of past recipients who did not participate in PRWE told us that they work 30 hours or more per week. There is a higher percentage of part-time work for past recipients without PRWE, as 14 percent answered that they are working part-time. Only 10 percent of past recipients who participated in PRWE replied that they were currently unemployed. Furthermore, 17 percent of past recipients without PRWE said that they were currently unemployed. (Table 1).

Table 1: Employment outcomes for students who participated in PRWE and employment outcomes for students who did not participate in PRWE (n = 2,247)

Current Employment Status	With PRWE	Without PRWE
Employment	90%	84%
<i>Yes, full time (30 hours or more per week).</i>	80%	70%
<i>Yes, part time (fewer than 30 hours per week).</i>	10%	14%
Unemployed and Non-Participation	10%	17%
<i>No, and I am not looking for work.</i>	4%	6%
<i>No, but I am looking for work.</i>	6%	11%
Grand Total	100%	100%

Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding

Further, students who participated in PRWE were more satisfied with their current employment. With 45 percent strongly agreeing that they were satisfied with their current employment (Table 2). Meanwhile, 40 percent of past recipients who did not participate in PRWE strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their current employment. Only 5 percent of past recipients who participated in PRWE strongly disagreed that they were satisfied with their current employment, as well as 6 percent of students who did not have PRWE (Table 2).

Table 2: Likert response rate on employment satisfaction for students who participated in PRWE and students who did not participate in PRWE (n = 2,247)

Employment Satisfaction	With PRWE	Without PRWE
<i>Strongly agree</i>	45%	40%
<i>Agree</i>	36%	34%
<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	7%	12%
<i>Disagree</i>	7%	8%
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	5%	6%
Grand Total	100%	100%

Likert Scale Question 32: I am satisfied with my current employment

After examining whether past recipients were, on average, working the number of hours they desire per week, we found that past recipients who did not participate in PRWE were also less likely to agree with the following statement. For example, 40 percent of past recipients who participated in PRWE agreed that they are working the number of hours they desire per week. While 34 percent of past recipients without PRWE agreed with the following statement. (Figure 3).

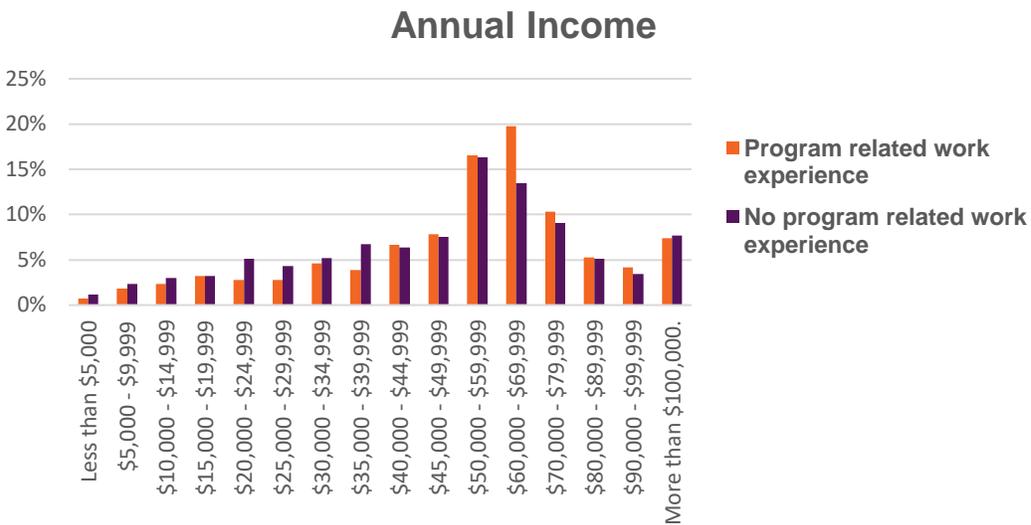
Figure 3: Likert response rate for students who participated in PRWE and are working the number of hours they desire per week and students who did not participate in PRWE (n = 2,247)

Employment Satisfaction	With PRWE	Without PRWE
<i>Strongly agree</i>	37%	36%
<i>Agree</i>	40%	34%
<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	7%	12%
<i>Disagree</i>	10%	11%
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	6%	6%
Grand Total	100%	100%

Likert Scale Question 32: On average, I am working the number of hours I desire per week

We wanted to examine whether there were differences between the annual income of students who participated in PRWE, and the annual income of students who did not participate in PRWE (Table 4). After the analysis, we found similarities between the two groups, with a slight difference in distribution. Students with PRWE are more likely to make between \$60,000 and \$69,999 per year (20 percent) than students who did not participate in PRWE (13 percent). However, both groups have a substantial proportion of past recipients making between \$50,000 to \$79,999 per year.

Figure 4: The annual income of past recipients who participated in PRWE and the annual income of past recipients who did not participate in PRWE (n = 2,247)



Limitations

As with all research studies, the design of the current study is subject to some limitations. We did not examine fields of study or sectors of employment for this report. The availability of PRWE may vary; it might be more accessible in some fields of study or in certain geographical regions. Also, post-graduate employment might be easier to obtain in certain fields of study. Some fields of employment also pay individuals a higher wage out of school, which means that we could be looking at a subset of graduates whom we may expect to have higher income or employment.

We were also unable to determine why and how long past recipients were unemployed. Past recipients may be pursuing higher education, caring for loved ones, or starting their own businesses. Further, some of the past recipients may be unemployed because they are enrolled in graduate studies. Therefore, they could have claimed they were “unemployed and not looking for work.”

The data also failed to capture the timeframe of transition for past recipients who graduated from their program and how long they were unemployed. Therefore, greater detail on the transition phase from studies to careers is not available.

Conclusion

This report highlights a strong relationship between Indigenous students who participate in PRWE and their current employment outcomes. The results indicate that PRWE can have a positive impact on the success of Indigenous students who are transitioning from post-secondary institutions into a career setting. The amount of hands-on experience that Indigenous students gain from participating in PRWE generated positive post-graduate outcomes for many of the students who are seeking employment. It can be beneficial to integrate PRWE in a post-secondary setting to increase the overall future employment outcomes for Indigenous students.

For future studies, it would be beneficial to examine fields of study and sectors of employment to better understand how the availability of PRWE may vary in some fields of study or geographical areas. Additional information on whether past recipients were pursuing higher education would also have an impact on employment outcomes for future research. Greater detail on the transition phase from post-secondary education to a career setting is needed. With this information, we would be able to determine how Indigenous students gain employment, why others are unemployed and for how long.

There was limited amount of information regarding Indigenous students' experiences with PRWE. However, post-secondary students who participate in PRWE develop confidence and knowledge in the work they generate. They also have an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they develop during their studies in the workplace. Many students gain knowledge and skills they would not have acquired in the classroom and agree that hands on experience is valuable for future employment. Those who participate in PRWE feel prepared to enter the workforce, and with the confidence they build, also feel self-assured while seeking employment after graduation. Further, students who participate in PRWE agree that they were given an opportunity to learn something new everyday. Building relationships and meeting individuals in the same field of interest has also shown to have a positive impact on those who participated in PRWE (Rice, 2018). While these findings are for all post-secondary learners who participated in PRWE, Indigenous students may share similar benefits. Until further research is done, this would be our closest approximation for what Indigenous students would experience while participating in PRWE.

Indigenous students often face many barriers while trying to achieve post-secondary education. For example, Indigenous students might be the first generation in their family to obtain higher education, and many will not have the support and guidance from family members. Lack of support can have an influence on the academic goals they set out for themselves. Other barriers include financial strain, displacement, loss of belongingness, and systemic barriers, such as programming or curricula that fail to respectfully include Indigenous peoples, their knowledge, histories, and teachings (Shankar, Ip, Khalema, 2020). Although Indigenous students have barriers that may be challenging to their post-secondary education, the self-determination and resilience they generate throughout their post-secondary experience is exceptional. With post-

secondary education and PRWE, Indigenous students can become economically self-sufficient and develop their own potential to further their academic and professional goals.

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