

Work-Integrated Learning Checkpoint

May 3, 2024

Prepared for UASU Executive Committee by
Department of Research and Advocacy



Overview

This briefing uses data from the 2023 and 2018 UASU Annual Surveys to explore student participation in [work-integrated learning \(WIL\)](#). The University of Alberta, as part of its funding agreement with the Government of Alberta, declares that 99% of its programs "offer WIL opportunities to students," up from 62% in 2020-21. It does not appear that there are enough opportunities for the qualified students who want them, nor does it appear that students are growing more interested in WIL or succeeding in finding a placement when they attempt to do so.

Points of Concern

- Rates of participation in WIL, and intentions to participate, have remained completely stable since 2018, both in whole-sample terms and by year of study. This calls into question the effectiveness of years of mandates to prioritize WIL.
- For participation, faculties of special concern include Native Studies and Science. Some improvements were noted in Augustana, CSJ, Arts, and KSR, but participation remains low.
- In 2018, non-binary students were especially likely to participate in WIL; they are now less likely than men or women to participate.
- 40% of respondents do not know WIL opportunities exist in their program, rising to ~50% in KSR and Science, and ~60% in Augustana, CSJ, and Native Studies.
- 35% of respondents attempted to find WIL opportunities, and 60% of them never found a placement. Augustana, Science, and Native Studies looked particularly negative, within the limits of our sample.

Positive Developments

- Arts participation rose around 50%, and KSR participation more than doubled.
- International students were half as likely as domestic students to participate in 2018; that gap has almost entirely closed, within the limits of our sample.
- In 2018, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students were somewhat less likely than other students to participate; that gap has closed.
- As in 2018, disabled students are just as likely as other students to participate.

Potential Recommendations for Decision-Makers

1. Improve communication and information about Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) across all faculties to increase awareness and participation.
2. Increase WIL program support by dedicating staff, fully integrating WIL into program materials, providing options through academic advisors, and launching awareness campaigns about WIL opportunities.

3. Provide dedicated approaches and resources targeted to faculties with lower participation rates in WIL or where it's not a requirement, to increase engagement and support at the faculty or departmental level.
4. Streamline the process of accessing WIL and address existing barriers, including but not limited to:
 - a. Difficulty in finding suitable opportunities.
 - b. Challenges in securing placements.
 - c. Address equity concerns, such as racial harassment, reported by associations like the Black Pharmacy Students' Association, especially in rural placements.
5. Implement measures to ensure the safety and well-being of all students participating in WIL, including:
 - a. Providing adequate support, resources, and avenues for recourse for students who encounter unsafe or discriminatory environments during their placements.
 - b. Addressing financial hardships, including considerations for relocation and living expenses in unfamiliar locations.
6. Conduct further research to identify specific challenges and factors influencing student participation in WIL, to inform the development of future onboarding strategies and continually improve student outcomes.
7. Work with students, student groups, and associations to identify and address equity concerns within WIL programs, which may dissuade participation or create additional barriers.
8. Collaborate with industry partners and the Government of Alberta to expand and diversify WIL placements available to students, enhancing accessibility and relevance.
 - a. Advocate for enhanced support for work-integrated learning opportunities from the Government of Alberta, including expanding access and funding to Temporary Employment Programs such as in-province summer job employment programs, apprenticeships, field placements, mandatory professional practice, co-ops, internships, applied research projects, service learning etc.
9. Collaborate with relevant partners, including employers and the Government of Alberta, to ensure the availability of high-quality placements and address concerns regarding the feasibility of providing WIL opportunities.

Introduction to PBF and WIL in IMAs

In 2021-22, after a COVID-related delay, Alberta instituted a performance-based funding (PBF) system that tied a portion of post-secondary institutions' funding (as listed in the [Investment Management Agreements](#) (IMAs)) to a few specific metrics.

PBF is not inherently positive or negative for institutions, but can vary from extremely bad (i.e. putting major funding at risk through unachievable targets) to empty (very easily achievable targets) to good (incentivizing improvements). [This depends on which metrics are chosen and which targets are set.](#) In Alberta, years of student and academic advocacy went into ensuring that the PBF system creates reasonable incentives and does not put major funding at risk.

For the purposes of this briefing, the only important element of UAlberta's [IMA](#) is that a portion of funding is tied to Funding Metric 1: Work Integrated Learning (WIL).

Funding Metric 1: Work Integrated Learning (WIL) by School Year

Proportion of approved programs that offer WIL opportunities to students.	2020-21 Actual	2021-22 Actual	2022-23 Target	2023-24 Target	2024-25 Target
	62%	99%	89%	95%	95%
	Tolerance Threshold		5%	7%	7%
	Weighting		4%	9%	9%

Student leaders' criticism has typically revolved around the idea that, if 99% of UAlberta's programs can be claimed as having WIL opportunities, the threshold for that may not be meaningful. In any given program, there likely are not enough opportunities for the qualified students who want them. That has not been seen as a reason to ask Advanced Education to scrap or reevaluate the metric, but it is certainly a reason to keep asking for as many student opportunities as possible, with an eye to much-needed transparency.

Given the high importance that Advanced Education and UAlberta administration have attached to ensuring students have WIL opportunities, and given that UAlberta now lists 99% of programs as having WIL opportunities (up from 62%), it is reasonable to ask whether all this effort increased the proportion of students who are participating in WIL or plan to participate.

The answer is, unequivocally, no. Rates of participation and plans to participate, as shown below, have not changed even when controlling by year of study.

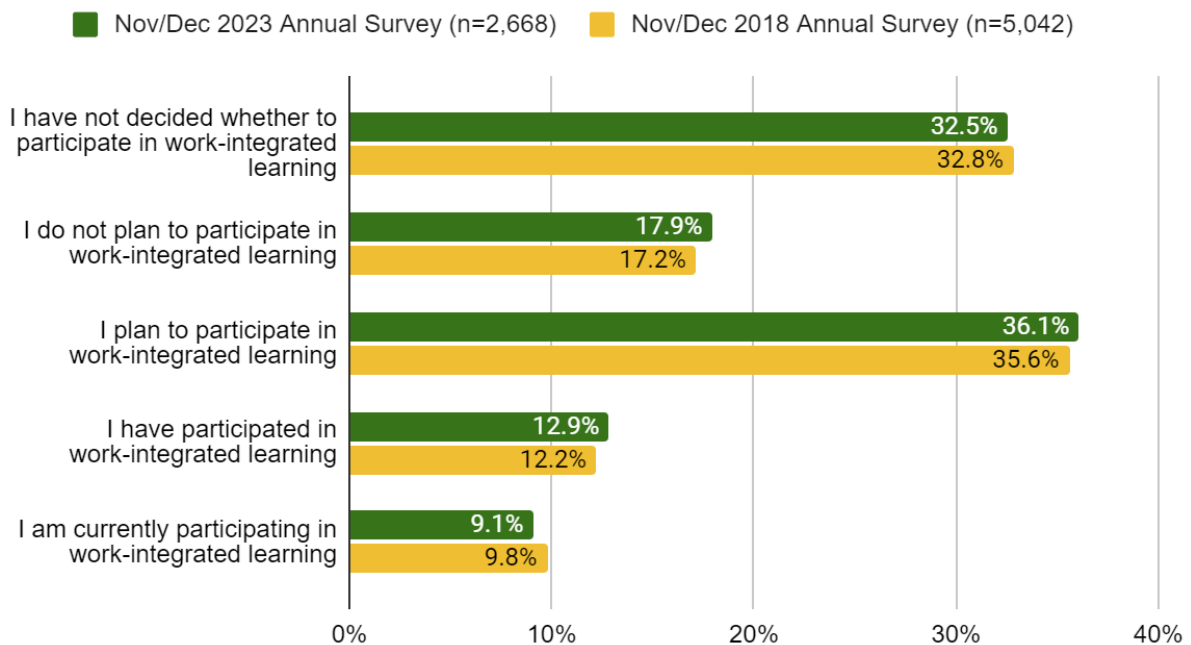
Participation and Intention

In November/December 2018, roughly one year before Advanced Education began seriously exploring PBF, the UASU Annual Survey included the following multiple-choice question:

"Work-integrated learning' refers to opportunities like internships, co-ops, field experience, student teaching, or clinical placements. Can you tell us about your participation in work-integrated learning?"

- I have not decided whether to participate in work-integrated learning
- I do not plan to participate in work-integrated learning
- I plan to participate in work-integrated learning
- I have participated in work-integrated learning
- I am currently participating in work-integrated learning

This question was asked again in November/December 2023, more than two years after the WIL metric was instituted. The overall result was in lockstep with 2018 in terms of both participation and intentions to participate. This strongly suggests that, if the goal is to increase the proportion of students in work-integrated learning, other levers (for example, the return of the Summer Temporary Employment Program) may be important.

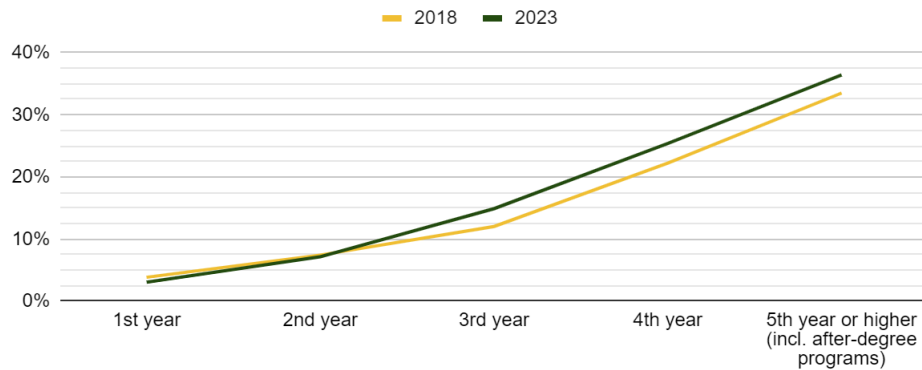


By Year of Study

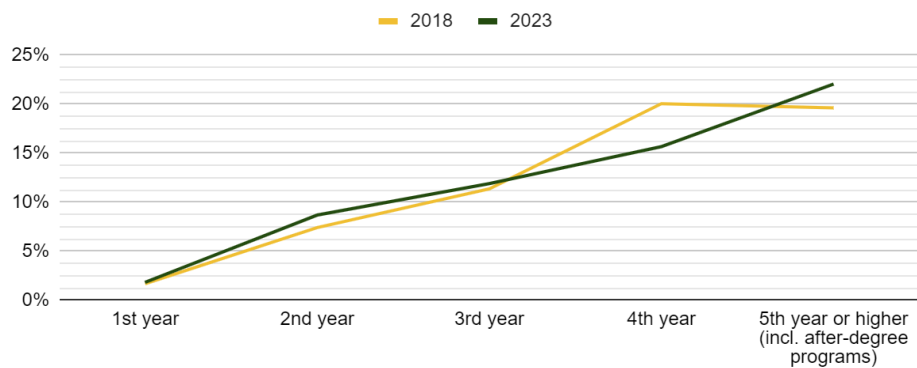
Third-year students and higher were three percentage points more likely in 2023 than in 2018 to have previously participated. Current participation for fourth-year students in Fall Semester, however, fell somewhat. In combination, total participation (past plus current at time of survey) showed no significant change in five years.

With the caveat that these surveys took place at the end of Fall Semester, it appears that around half of students continue to get no WIL experience before they graduate.

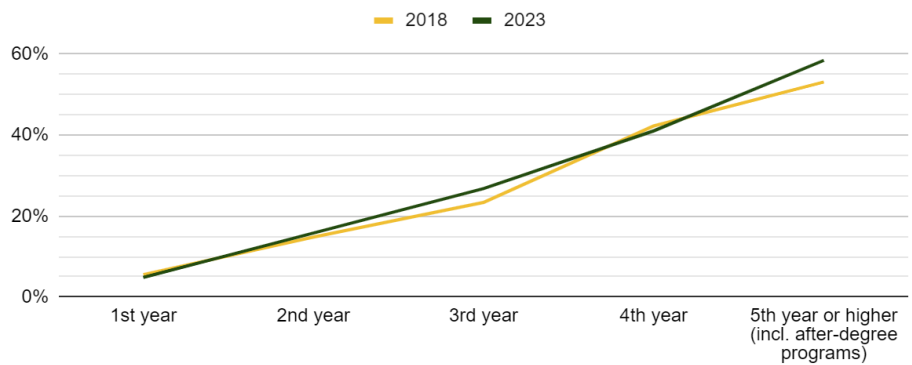
Have participated (not currently)



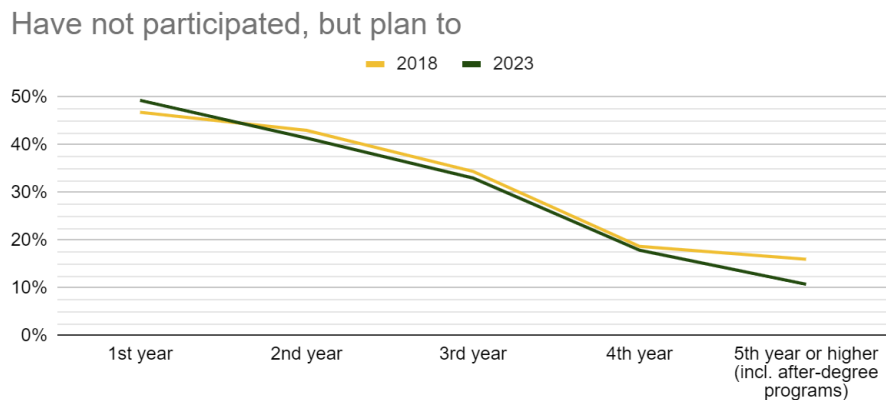
Currently participating at time of survey



Total participation (past + current at time of survey)



Non-participants' intentions stayed in lockstep as well; plans to participate even fell slightly in the five-year interval.



By Faculty

Cross-tabulating by faculty gives less reliable results than by year of study, because many faculties are very small, generating only a few dozen respondents or less, even in large surveys. However, some credible patterns emerged:

- The lowest WIL participation (past plus current at time of survey) across the five-year interval was in Native Studies and Science (~9-10%).
- WIL participation at Augustana and Campus Saint-Jean appears to have strongly improved, albeit with a small sample size; around ¼ of Augustana and CSJ students had participated by Fall 2023.
- Arts participation rose from 9% to 14%.
 - Focusing on results closer to graduation, out of 77 fourth-year Arts respondents in the 2023 survey, 20 (26%) were currently participating or had participated; another 13 (19%) still planned to participate.
- KSR participation more than doubled (10% to 24%).

By Demographic

There are innumerable ways to apply demographic cross-tabulation to this data, especially in combination with year of study. Some highlights:

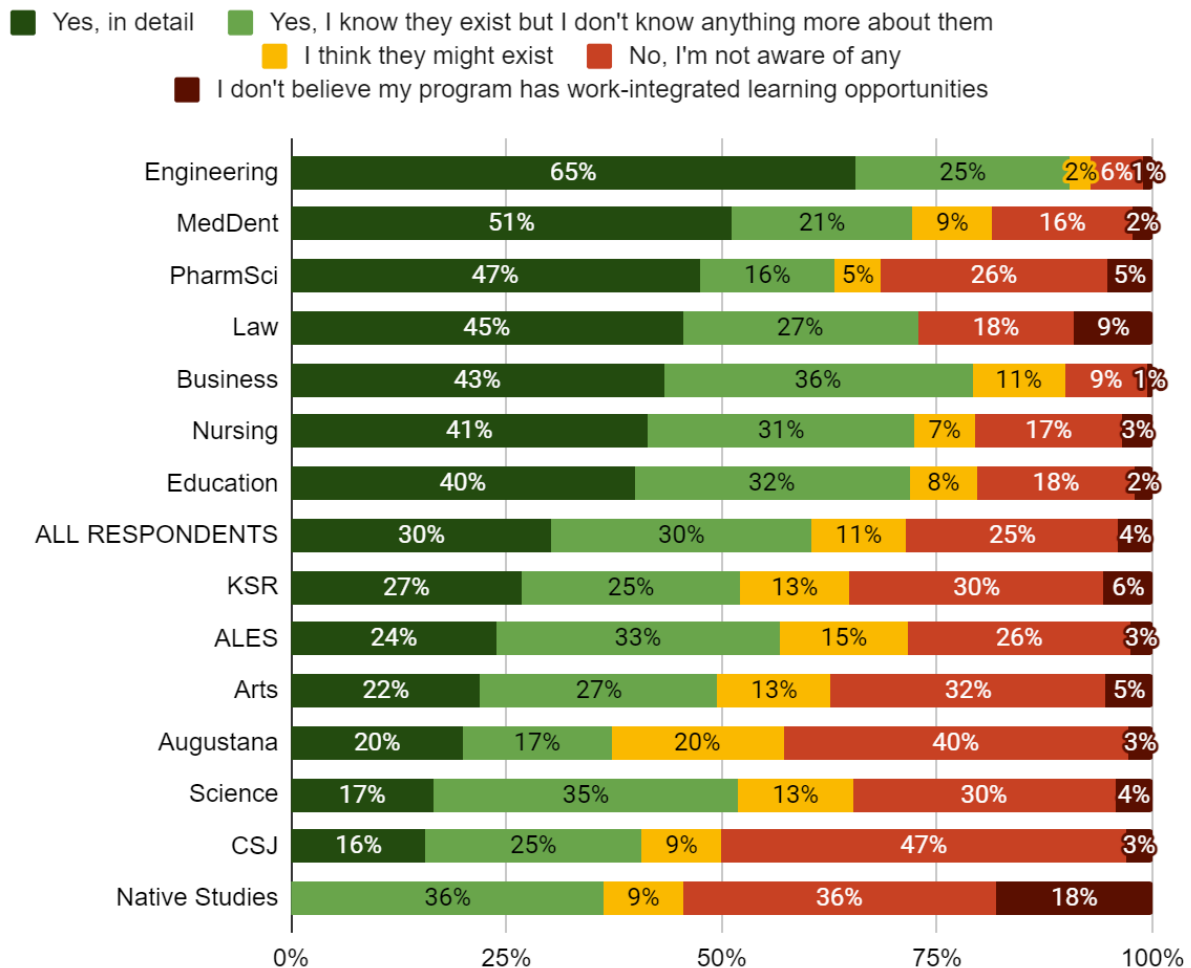
- In 2018, non-binary students were especially likely to participate (past plus current), at 23%. In 2023, that fell to 17%, lower than both men and women.
- In 2018, participation was at 25% for men but 21% for women. Those proportions remained constant in 2023: 24% of men and 21% of women.
- In 2018, international students were very unlikely to participate (11% compared to 23% of domestic students). By 2023, that gap had closed (20% versus 22%).
- In 2018, First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit students were somewhat less likely than other students to participate (19% versus 22%). That gap did not appear in 2023 (21% versus 22%).
- In 2018, disabled students were roughly as likely as other students to participate (23% versus 22%). That remained true in 2023 (21% versus 22%).
- In 2023, transgender students were just as likely as cisgender students to participate (22%).

Awareness of Opportunities

The 2023 survey included a follow-up question: "By the University's standards, virtually all undergraduate programs now have work-integrated learning opportunities. Are you aware of work-integrated learning opportunities in your program?"

- Yes, in detail.
- Yes, I know they exist.
- I think they might exist.
- No, I'm not aware of any.
- I don't believe my program has work-integrated learning opportunities.

The following chart is sorted by 'Yes, in detail.'



It seems clear that, even in the faculties that have seen some improvement (KSR, CSJ, Augustana, ALES), awareness of WIL opportunities is relatively low. Native Studies and Science, which were faculties of concern above, also compare poorly here.

Attempts to Access Opportunities

The 2023 survey included a second follow-up question: "By the University's standards, virtually all undergraduate programs now have work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities. Have you tried to access WIL opportunities in your program? (If you've tried on multiple occasions, choose all the outcomes that apply.)" As this was a 'choose all that apply' question, each item should be understood individually, and compared against individual others, not added to others.

- No, and I don't intend to: 23.5%
- No, but I intend to: 48.8%
- Yes, and I couldn't find any WIL opportunities: 9.0%
- Yes, and I found some WIL opportunities, but they wouldn't work for me: 7.3%
- Yes, and I found some WIL opportunities, but I couldn't get into them: 4.9%
- Yes, and I got a WIL placement, but my experience was negative: 2.0%
- Yes, and I got a WIL placement, and my experience was positive: 11.9%

In total, 35.2% of respondents to this 'choose all that apply' question tried to access WIL at least once, and 14.0% of respondents (only 40% of those who tried) eventually succeeded in finding a WIL placement.

The following chart breaks down the last five outcomes by faculty, within the limits of our sample. By and large, most students who seek WIL do not find it, with the exceptions of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Education, Medicine and Dentistry, and Nursing, where WIL is mandatory. The situation in Augustana, Science, and Native Studies, within the limits of our sample, was particularly negative.

