

Ethical Risk Management in Co-operative Education Programs

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Abstract

Work-integrated learning (WIL) practitioners and higher education institutions (HEIs) regularly encounter ethical issues, dilemmas, or conflicts ('risks') in delivering WIL programs. Ethical risks that are not properly identified and managed can result in negative financial, legal and reputational consequences for the HEI. A case study of 10 Canadian WIL practitioners reported in this article identifies practices that reduce, transfer, control or eliminate ethical risk in co-operative education, a popular type of WIL program in Canadian HEIs. The findings are presented as a framework of risk management practices involving education and training, institutional support, policies and processes, collaboration with the WIL community, and student communication. A key theme underpinning the ethical risk management practices is the complexity of maintaining productive, quality relationships between three categories of WIL stakeholders—students, employers and the HEI. This study builds on earlier research revealing characteristics of ethical risk in WIL, with the subsequent findings intended to educate WIL stakeholders and assist them with evaluating and improving ethical risk management.

Keywords: work-integrated learning, co-operative education, ethical risk, risk management, ethics

Previous work by the authors (Cameron, Dodds, & Maclean, 2019b) has described the ethical issues, dilemmas, or conflicts (collectively described as 'risks') experienced by work-integrated learning (WIL) practitioners. Ethical risks involve the conduct of WIL practitioners, students and employers and align with five ethical characteristics: equity, integrity, transparency, care, and adherence to rules (Cameron, Dodds, & Maclean, 2020). If not properly managed, ethical risks can have reputational, legal, and financial consequences for higher education institutions (HEIs), and negatively impact the goal of delivering quality WIL opportunities to students (Cameron, 2017). This article explores how WIL practitioners manage the ethical risks in co-operative education programs (co-op).

Co-op is a type of WIL program. WIL is defined as a "model or process of curricular experiential education which formally and intentionally integrates a student's academic studies within a workplace or practice setting" (Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL), 2020b). The distinguishing features of co-op, when compared to oth-

er types of WIL (e.g. internship, practicum), are the work term length relative to classroom study, and the requirement that work be paid (Cameron et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2016). WIL practitioners is an umbrella term which describes all HEI employees who are involved with the management and/or delivery of WIL programs, including co-op. WIL practitioners generally engage with three key stakeholder groups; the co-op student, the work term employer, and the HEI which includes various personnel including WIL practitioners. Co-op program rules and policies exist, but each student-employer experience is unique, and practitioners often encounter ethically charged situations which could be damaging from a risk management perspective. On behalf of the HEI, WIL practitioners must take steps to reduce, transfer, control or eliminate ethical risk.

The purpose of this article is to describe the ethical risk management practices of WIL practitioners. HEI management and WIL practitioners can utilize the findings to educate their staff about risk management, and to evaluate and improve existing HEI risk management frameworks, as they apply to co-op programs. This article first reviews the literature relevant to ethical risk management in co-op programs, followed by a descrip-

tion of the research design, including case selection, data collection and data analytic techniques. The study findings are then presented as a framework of risk management practices, being education and training, institutional support, policies and processes, collaboration with the WIL community, and student communication. Relationship management is identified in the subsequent discussion as the key theme underpinning the ethical risk management practices of WIL practitioners. The article concludes by outlining recommendations for improving ethical risk management.

Literature Review

An understanding of how WIL practitioners manage the ethical risks they encounter is limited because empirical studies focus on the ethical risks experienced by students, particularly in health-related disciplines (Cameron et al., 2019b). Authors identify the ethical dilemmas of students, and generally recommend institutional support such as education and training to improve students' ethical decision-making and awareness, and thereby manage ethical risks (Davies & Heyward, 2019; Paulins & Lombardy, 2005; Ricks, 2003). In fact, student experiences of ethical risk can inform ethics education and WIL curriculum design (Sharp, Kuthy, & Heller, 2005). For example, Paulins & Lombardy (2005) incorporated case studies of ethical dilemmas experienced by retail interns into the curriculum to improve ethical

awareness and understanding. Besides formal education and training, students may access a range of resources to manage ethical risks such as supervisors, peer consultation, in-class discussion, as well as host organization personnel and policy (Dodd, 2007).

Institution and professional association ethics codes or policies are also frequently cited risk management mechanisms, guiding WIL practitioners as to how they should manage an ethical risk. Ethics policies and codes may cover a diverse range of WIL activities including the sharing of sensitive student information (Reeser & Wertkin, 1997), recruitment of host organizations (Baker, 2012; CEWIL, 2020a), stakeholder conduct during the WIL program (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010), and decision-making in response to an ethical risk (Johnston-Goodstar, 2012). An important starting point for institutional risk management is ensuring that host organizations, as well as WIL activities, comply with ethical standards prescribed by institution policy (Baker, 2012). However, WIL practitioners may be unaware of institution policy designed to manage ethical risks. For instance, a study by Newhook (2013) of ethical and legal risks in WIL programs from multiple stakeholder perspectives revealed that WIL practitioners were largely 'self-taught' in risk management. Colleagues and previous work experiences were the primary sources of education, not the institution. The author concluded that "it is likely then that as a result of

ineffective risk communication coordinators lack awareness of the relevant policies and are unaware of the connection between risk and university policy" (Newhook, 2013, at p. 89).

The student, and not WIL practitioner, is predominantly the unit for analyzing ethical risk management in WIL programs. As such, the literature is generally limited to examples of how individual WIL practitioners, typically the authors, responded to particular ethical dilemmas they experienced. These WIL practitioners use institution policies and WIL agreements to address unethical student behavior (Mark, 2001), codes in ethical decision-making (Johnston-Goodstar, 2012; Surbeck 2013), as well as open discussion of live ethical issues with students and WIL practitioners to educate stakeholders and to manage the ethical risk in question (Surbeck, 2013). Neil-Smith (2001), when reflecting on ethical issues associated with industry scholarships in WIL programs, also stressed the importance of balancing stakeholder interests when managing risk: "co-op administrators must ensure that (the) interests of all parties are considered and respected; this requires constant vigilance and a balanced deliberate approach" (at p.37). The study reported in this article advances understanding of risk management in WIL by exploring how a stratified sample of Canadian WIL practitioners manage the ethical risks they experience in the specific context of co-op programs.

Methodology

Research Design

This research is part of a multiple instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) which explores the phenomenon of risk management in co-op programs. The research question relevant to this study is: *how do WIL practitioners manage ethical risk in co-operative education programs?* Five characteristics of ethical conduct and ethical risks identified by WIL practitioners have been reported separately by the authors (Cameron et al., 2019b). These ethical characteristics, as well as selected ethical risks, are referred to in the case study findings to contextualize, and to deepen understanding about how WIL practitioners manage these ethical risks.

Case Selection

A limitation of the case study is the sample size and geographical area, being 10 WIL practitioners in Canada. Accordingly, the sample cannot be generalized to a population of WIL practitioners. Nevertheless, the validity of the research design was supported by maximum variation sampling techniques in case selection and rich description of WIL practitioners' experiences in the case study findings. A case typology was maintained during case selection (Table 1) to gain diversity of WIL practitioner perspectives. Practitioners, who had to possess a minimum three years' experience with co-op programs, were each

selected from a different site in Canada. They were then stratified according to the following demographic characteristics: region of Canada, institution type and size, academic discipline(s) that the research participant is involved with in co-op, position, gender, experience, and co-op office. WIL practitioners may be working within a centralized co-op office (i.e. delivering co-op programs across all or multiple disciplines) or decentralized (single discipline).

Study Design

The data collected for the case study is based on 10 telephone and face-to-face interviews, with the interview design receiving institution ethics approval (BCIT 2017-34). The interviews began with structured demographic questions, followed by a mix of structured and open-ended questions about ethics, ethical risks and risk management. Structured questions (including prompts and probes) relevant to the study reported in this article include:

1. What ethical issues have you encountered in co-op programs?
2. How did you deal with the ethical issue?
 - a. Can you provide examples?
 - b. What assisted you in dealing with the ethical issue? What were the challenges in dealing with the ethical issue?
3. What recommendations would you make to improve the handling of ethical issues in co-op programs?

The data was analyzed using reflexivity, eclectic coding and pattern coding techniques, as previously described by the authors (Cameron et al., 2019b). Overall, the case study is presented as a cross-case analysis (Stake, 1995) of ethical risk management by WIL practitioners, who are given a pseudonym in the study findings which follow.

Results

Five risk management practices emerged from the data analysis—education and training, institutional support, policies and processes, collaboration within the WIL community, and student communication. Three WIL stakeholders (employer, student and HEI) shared in these practices, which are described in the sections which follow.

Education and Training

Education and training of WIL stakeholders about ethical risk situations and appropriate responses is timely and systematic. Mandatory student education and training of ethical risks takes place before the work term. John stresses the importance of clarity and communication when working with new co-op students to explain the tripartite relationship involving students, employers and the HEI: "...Educating them on professional conduct in the workplace and professional conduct before you even enter the workplace. I mean it starts right at the job search". While practitioners regularly discuss appropriate conduct in a broad sense, there are opportuni-

Table 1

Case typology of WIL practitioners

Region of Canada	N	Institution type	N	Institution size (students)	N	Discipline*	N
Central	4	University	8	< 6,000	2	Business	5
Western	3	College	2	6,000 – 20,000	3	Science & Engineering	5
Atlantic	3			> 20,000	5	Humanities & Social Sciences	2
						Tourism & Hospitality	2
						Arts	1
						Health	1
Co-op office size	N	Position	N	Gender	N	Experience	N
1 – 4 staff	4	Staff	5	Male	5	< 10 years	2
5 – 15 staff	4	Manager	3	Female	5	10 to 15 years	5
> 15 staff	2	Both	2			> 15 years	3

*Some participants have multi-discipline responsibilities

ties for educating students about ethical risk prior to co-op at two key touch points—when preparing for interviews and when reviewing student agreements (Clare). For instance, John conducts individual student meetings to ensure that application materials (resume and cover letter) are truthful. Providing accurate information to employers impacts the integrity of both the student and the co-op program.

Institutions also develop ethics-specific educational tools during the co-op program to manage ethical risk. Kate provides students with real-life scenarios during information sessions, workshops, mock interviews and one-on-one discussions: “we came across this recently, and this is how we had to deal with it, and you should be aware”. Clare’s institution created a simulation workshop series dealing with ‘grey area’ situations. Student engagement was high, and the series could be modified for an employer

WIL practitioner to “quality assurance check” the ethical standard of the co-op program, and to provide ethical guidance on issues revealed in student reflections. WIL practitioners may also educate students in dealing with ethical risks they experience during co-op. For instance, Alice struggled when a co-op student shared unsafe workplace activity which involved a co-op student from a different HEI. Her co-op team coached the student through an action plan sensitive to confidentiality. When suspecting that students were copying resumes, David relied on education and not policy to manage this ethical risk “... it’s not necessarily one of those things that we would push through governance. In the end, I want students to grow and learn”. In fact, Sarah’s institution has student awards which promote ethical behavior and integrity during co-op, offering “... the impetus to get them to perform at a higher level and not wander down

a dark alleyway”.

WIL practitioners train employers about their roles and responsibilities as a co-educator before engaging a co-op student. This includes articulating organizational expectations to students upfront through pre-employment packages, onboarding workshops and training (Lisa), and involving (amongst other things) a discussion on values and expectations for ethical behavior in the workplace. Program support is required for employers who may not have experience, time or resources to lead effectively when ethical challenges arise and may include webinars, inviting employers in for student-led panel sessions and ‘lunch-and-learns’ (Clare). WIL practitioners may educate employers with vetting student candidates and conducting reference checks, thereby avoiding ethical risks associated with WIL practitioner involvement in student selection on behalf of the employer (Greg). Coaching may continue during co-op to manage ethical risks relating to poor supervision. Alice described an employer who offered excellent learning experiences, but poor student supervision attributable to an aggressive communication style which was undermining student learning. The WIL practitioner recommended alternate techniques for working effectively with students, which helped the supervisor make adjustments, resulting in an improved student-employer relationship, a higher level of learning and better output.

WIL practitioners also educate and train each other about ethical risks through collaboration and resources. Purpose-driven conversations take place where practitioners routinely discuss cases that clearly demonstrate an ethical dilemma and “talk it through as a team” (Chris). A repository of best practices in response to an ethical risk, and past precedents from all stakeholder perspectives, represents effective risk management (Clare), with these resources potentially framed as an FAQ of different ethical challenges (Alice).

Institutional Support

Institutional divisions, other than the faculty delivering the co-op program, support WIL practitioners in ethically charged situations. Practitioners have benefited from speaking openly and in confidence with: the International Education office (Kate), counselling and career services personnel (Kate, Steve, Lisa, Greg), the on-campus ombudsman (Alice), campus security and safety about handling sexual allegations involving co-op students (Steve), accessibility advisors about appropriate actions and words to manage student limitations and medical conditions (Greg), and fair treatment and harassment advisors for legal counsel, risk management guidance and support with ethical issues impacting both the co-op team and students (Lisa). For instance, HEI accessibility advisors are involved with managing the oft-cited ethical

risk of students not disclosing their limitation or medical condition (Steve, Greg). Without disclosure, WIL practitioners cannot coordinate reasonable accommodations with the employer, and they witness “things dissolving and falling apart on the work term as a result of whatever accommodation they should have tabled” (Steve). According to Steve, advisors work towards facilitating a “circle of trust” with stakeholders, “where students are comfortable identifying where they might have a barrier, disclosing it and then working with us and the counselling team in accessibility, along with the employer, to make sure that their needs are being met and the employer’s needs are being met, as well”.

HEI legal counsel support WIL practitioners who encounter ethical issues with legal ramifications. Institutional lawyers guided a colleague of Clare’s team when a student was asked to sign a five-year non-compete clause when the work term was only four to eight months. In a separate occurrence, a change to Canadian cannabis regulation presented an ethical risk when alumni approached Clare with co-op opportunities. Clare liaised with legal counsel to discuss liability as well as the “... ethical issue to determine if those types of positions are things that we should recommend ... and if we can effectively work with those employers”. Institution-wide support may be required for ethical misconduct by students that also poses legal and reputation risks for the institution. For instance, John joined an

institution-wide committee, with participants from various experience and backgrounds, to investigate and discipline a student who had garnered a workplace client list from the employer to start their own business.

Policies and Processes

Policies and processes guide practitioner decision-making in response to ethical issues involving students and employers. Co-op is a contract between the student and HEI which incorporates policies and processes designed to afford students procedural fairness. Sarah implements an appeal process where co-op students can defend their actions, with the disciplinary action proportionate to the gravity of the alleged ethical misconduct: “[The student] shouldn’t stop studying engineering because they had something go amiss on their work term”. However, serious misconduct may result in termination of the work term and ineligibility to pursue future co-op opportunities, as was the case of a co-op student who stole employer contacts to bolster their own business client list, being an act of academic dishonesty (John). Conversely, student complaints relating to workplace harassment, workplace bullying or abuse of authority are resolved by following processes underpinned by fairness and relationship management. For instance, Chris’s team interviews the student before raising the issue with the appropriate employer representative: “where there is room

for misinterpretation of the intent of the other party, we don't want to throw the relationship into friction". In clear situations, the student is immediately removed from the workplace. Student-facing and employer-facing practitioner teams help with a fair review. If deemed safe, students are encouraged to solve problems by talking directly with their supervisor and engaging in workplace dispute resolution processes. Asking "what would you like us to do to help you?" allows for focused conversation between practitioner and student (Chris).

HEI policies and processes also apply to HEI recruitment of employers and employer recruitment of students. When onboarding new employers, a due diligence procedure facilitates consistent and fair treatment of prospective employers (Lisa). The information requested involves common employment conditions (work term, pay scale), but its focus is on the learning opportunities of co-op (description of duties, level of rigour) and employer participation as a co-educator with the HEI (worksit visits, evaluations). David identified the tension in recruitment between growing co-op opportunities and protecting students from harm: "Not every employer should be working in co-op. That doesn't make them a bad person or a bad employer, but they're not structured to provide the mentorship that co-op students require or need". The HEI may avoid ethical risks by terminating the employer relationship if the employer cannot meet the requisite

standard of a co-educator (Alice). Once onboarded, the employer may inappropriately request WIL practitioners to pre-screen student applicants or seek specific information about student grades, health and general suitability. Processes which prohibit such practitioner conduct, and make employers solely responsible for applicant review and hiring, creates a level playing field for both students and employers in recruitment (Chris).

Despite due diligence processes, the employer may engage in conduct which exposes the HEI to ethical risks. HEIs respond by engaging in processes which may terminate or suspend the employer relationship. The decision to terminate is based on the nature of the misconduct and the HEI-employer relationship - length, quality and demonstrated alignment with co-op objectives (Chris). For instance, John has removed students from a workplace after discovering that their actual work practice did not match the duties outlined in the job posting, and employers have been removed from co-op programs for cancelling employment opportunities or withdrawing offers close to the work term start date (Chris, John). Alternatively, employers who withdraw employment offers may remain in co-op subject to conditions, such as covering the student's co-op fee or providing networking support, and they may be subject to a disclaimer on future postings alerting students that in the past, offers of employment have been withdrawn (Chris). Policies provide an ethical standard for WIL practitioners to

employ, but this does not prevent the WIL practitioner from offering solutions to employers that do not pose ethical risk. For instance, employers may offer co-op students full-time, permanent positions while on their work term, thereby discouraging a return to courses (Cameron et al, 2019b). Greg articulates the policy prohibiting such conduct, but as an alternative, suggests that the employer: hire the student for an additional work term (if possible), engage in other forms of WIL (applied studies), offer part time hours while the student completes their studies, and/or hires the student after graduation.

Collaboration With the WIL Community

WIL practitioners collaborate within their institution and externally through provincial and national associations to manage ethical risks. Clare acknowledged that collaboration using case conferencing provides clarity for WIL practitioners when responding to ethical risks: "... sometimes with ethical issues it's just kind of difficult to know how to proceed. It's difficult to know if there's a clear path". Discussions focus on alternatives and potential outcomes in the best interest of the student (first and foremost), HEI and the employer. Colleagues with similar ethical values provide collective strength, or validation, for the WIL practitioner when encountering an ethical dilemma. For instance, Alice's rejection of employer requests to "send only the good

students”, even when employers maintain that *other* institutions conduct applicant screening, is an action supported by colleagues who share a “very clear moral compass”.

Colleagues also provide a balanced view on an ethical risk by articulating student and employer perspectives through case consultation (Steve), and act as an ethical touchstone for WIL practitioners (Steve, Alice). When struggling with difficult decisions, Steve credits the ethical guidance of management: “... she’s always said ‘if you can explain it to me in a way that makes sense, and a way that makes you sleep at night, and really just employ some pretty hardcore common sense, you’re making the right decision’”. Regular meetings to discuss student and employer issues provides Alice with a sounding board and an opportunity to share intelligence about employers with whom multiple WIL practitioners interact with: “... we will sound off as a group on situations that we’re dealing with. Because we do have some shared employers. Therefore, there’s going to be shared student experiences. And so that’s been really nice, to be able to talk openly about it as a group if we want”. Provincial and national WIL associations also facilitate collaboration with WIL colleagues, providing access to best practice and resources. Lisa attributes the success of their program to adopting ideas shared in a “here’s what we’re doing” format at national conferences and professional development sessions. Greg reaches

out to CEWIL Canada regularly with questions for colleagues and board members, which include ethical issues.

Student Communication

Student communication, both incoming and outgoing, complements policies and processes designed to manage ethical risks. Steve emphasises the importance of building a program culture of communication, where students are comfortable sharing their concerns with Steve who can then be proactive in managing ethical issues, as “most of the issues we have come from students not saying anything until it’s too late”. WIL practitioners provide counsel and positive reinforcement so that students remain connected with the institution during co-op. Strategically timed emails reinforce course responsibilities and deadlines, reminding students that WIL practitioners are available year-round (Lisa). The WIL practitioner also act as liaison for student access to other institution services. For instance, when a student reported workplace harassment but would not permit the institution to intervene, Lisa connected the student with both the HEI’s counselling services and the harassment and discrimination advisor, reinforcing the option to change employers throughout the discussions. When workplace accommodation for health or mental needs are disclosed, Greg starts with an employer meeting to determine “what’s fair for the employer to offer a student while they’re

employed with them, and what’s fair for the student”. Determining student workplace readiness involves subsequent communication with the counselling department.

Student communication with employers can minimise the consequences of an ethical risk created by students. For example, students who terminate a co-op opportunity after accepting an offer was an oft-cited ethical risk (Chris, Clare). For students who disclose beforehand their intention to terminate the co-op arrangement, Clare recommends to students to communicate with the employer: “If you’re going to do this, with or without our support, you need to be communicating with the employer and be up front”. In one case, Clare required a student to write a letter of apology to the employer and was informed, following meeting with their faculty advisor, co-op advisor and manager, that they would be removed from the co-op program if the action was repeated. Clare then documented the activities and discussion in a follow-up e-mail. Fortunately, the employer relationship was maintained.

WIL practitioner communication also makes clear the responsibility of the student to manage the ethical risks they create. Kate focused on clarity and meticulous record keeping when dealing with an international co-op student who ignored work permit rules. With guidance from the HEI’s international student center, Kate provided clear information on options and potential consequences. All involved maintained detailed

records of emails and discussions with the student and made it "... very, very clear that it was their decision to move forward with this against our better judgement, against the institution's better judgement and then, again, outlining what the consequences might be down the road if they elected to stay in Canada". The WIL practitioner effectively transfers risk to the student, clearly communicating that it is the student's responsibility to make the final decision on a matter which raises ethical issues, while it is the institution's role to advise about the potential consequences of student decision-making.

Discussion

The findings are the first known systematic study of ethical risk management by WIL practitioners in co-op. In particular, the study described methods for *educating and training* WIL practitioners to handle ethical issues, whereas the existing literature focuses on WIL practitioner education of students (Davies & Heyward, 2019; Paulins, 2005; Ricks, 2003). Institution *policies and processes* to manage unethical stakeholder conduct has previously been identified as a risk management practice (Baker, 2012; CEWIL, 2020a; Cooper et al., 2010; Johnston-Goodstar, 2012; Newhook, 2013; Reeser & Werkin, 1997), and is consistent with WIL practitioners' assertions that 'adherence to rules' is a characteristic of ethical conduct (Cameron et al., 2019b). WIL practitioners

who self-regulate, that is adopt their own rules or processes for managing co-op situations, may be attribute to their perception that the policy undermines stakeholder interests, for example a minimum GPA requirement for students to enter a co-op program (Cameron et al., 2019b), or may arise from the total absence of policy. Either way, a failure of policy exposes the institution to ethical risks.

The experiences of WIL practitioners also revealed three practices to manage ethical risk not previously examined in the literature – institutional support, collaboration with the WIL community, and student communication. Internal and external collaboration with WIL practitioners, as well as support from institutional divisions (e.g. legal, disability and equity services) are practices which manage other risks including legal, reputation and operational risks (Cameron, 2019; Cameron et al., 2019a). As such, the findings confirm the capacity of these practices to manage ethical and non-ethical risks which may undermine the delivery of co-op programs.

Relationship management was the theme that underpinned the five risk management practices. Co-op involves more stakeholders, and relationships between stakeholders, than traditional study programs. The overall tripartite stakeholder relationship (student-employer-institution) entails layers of internal and external relationships, such as employer supervisor-student; institution supervisor-student; supervisor-supervisor; student-client/patient; WIL practi-

titioner-employer; and WIL practitioner-other institution divisions. The additional layers of communication attributable to additional relationships can complicate management of co-op programs and thereby expose the institution to risk (Rosenblum & Raphael, 1987). In fact, qualitative studies have identified stakeholder relationships as a source of strategic, legal and reputational risk (Cameron et al., 2019a). Effeney (2019) formulated a stakeholder centric model for use in risk management that conceptualizes risk in WIL as "a network of potentially fragile relationships and interactions". If a breakdown in any relationship is a risk in WIL, then practices which manage relationships represent risk management. The study by Cameron et al. (2019a) found HEIs that effectively manage stakeholder relationship by clearly articulating their rights and obligations, as well as providing timely communication and education, can minimize risk in WIL programs.

Figure 1 illustrates the tripartite stakeholder relationship in the context of ethical risk management. The five characteristics of ethics described by WIL practitioners in the previous study (Cameron et al. 2019b) provide a foundation for the risk management practices of HEIs. From a HEI perspective, a breakdown in any internal relationships (e.g. between WIL practitioners) or external relationships (e.g. HEI-employer, academic supervisor-employer supervisor) can expose HEIs to ethical risks. WIL practitioners can effectively man-

age stakeholder relationships by educating employers and students about their rights and responsibilities on co-op (care), regularly communicating with students before and during co-op (care, transparency), applying policies and processes to regulate stakeholder behavior (adhere to rules, integrity, transparency), and by receiving support from the institution through internal collaboration and education to improve their understanding of ethical risks or ‘risk literacy’ (Cameron & Orrell, *in press*), and when managing ethical risks (care).

The research findings also revealed that relationship management often involves a balance within and across stakeholder groups. Equity was the ethical characteristic that supported this balancing exercise by WIL practitioners. WIL practitioners engage in balanced, as opposed to student-centered, decision-making when confronted by an ethical risk that may impact HEI-student relationships. For instance, David considered the interests of other students who may miss out on that co-op placement (equity) in rejecting a student’s request to complete an additional co-op above and beyond degree requirements. Risk management practices grounded in equity can also strengthen student-employer relationships. For instance, in response to student discontent with their employer, Alice allowed the employer time to address the issues in their relationship, rather than immediately intervening on behalf of the student. It was agreed with the employer

that Alice be updated about the outcome of their meeting so that Alice could subsequently provide support to the student, who was working in a remote location. Alice felt it was important to give the supervisor space and “build that trust and hope that they’re going to support the student”.

Policies and processes, as well as institutional support, can guide WIL practitioners in balanced decision-making involving students and employers. Clare’s institution has a formal process for handling student-employer conflict. When a student or employer approaches the WIL practitioner with a complaint or concern, they first collect and document details from both sides. A co-op portal allows sections for notes on each student file. Unless the student has expressed workplace health and safety concerns which require immediate action, in-person meetings are arranged at the work site, on campus or in a neutral location. Case conferencing with other staff and practitioners may follow. An action plan is created and shared with the student and/or employer as appropriate.

Disciplinary processes also require a delicate balance to maintain HEI relationships with students and employers. In extreme cases, relationship management may result in the HEI terminating the relationship, thus barring the student or the employer from future co-op opportunities (Chris). In all cases, Chris checks to see that the employer fulfilled their responsibilities as a quality co-op supervisor, verifying that

the student was informed of their shortcomings and was offered the opportunity for improvement. If activities before termination are questionable, a greater duty of care is offered to the student, often allowing them to continue in co-op. If the employer terminated the student responsibly, students are ineligible to continue with co-op. As stated by Chris:

But, if there’s any question mark at all about the sequence of events, we’ll basically give the student another opportunity to succeed with some very clear direction on ‘if this happens again, you’ll be ineligible to continue’ ... I think we do a good job of exercising fairness and transparency in the process.

The next section outlines practices for improving ethical risk management, based on the research findings and the recommendations of WIL practitioners during the interviews.

Conclusion

Canadian WIL practitioners manage ethical risk through education and training, institutional support, policies and processes, collaboration with the WIL community, and student communication. The capability of the WIL practitioner to manage a variety of stakeholder relationships is a strong indicator of effective ethical risk management. The rich description of risk management practices reported in this article reinforces the complexity

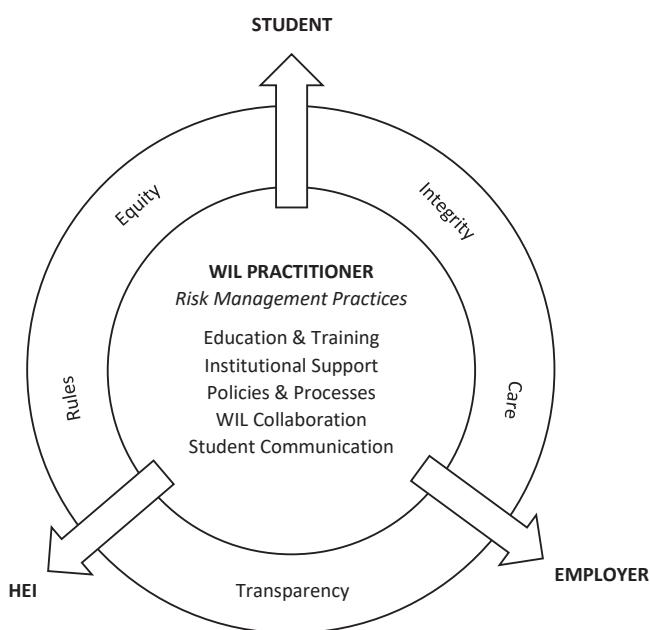


Figure 1: Ethical risk management in WIL

of the WIL practitioner role in managing stakeholder relations with care, equity and transparency, while adhering to program rules and maintaining program integrity. WIL practitioners clearly welcome support and collaboration in building greater understanding of ethical risk and risk management practices, and professional associations have a role to play in providing resources to manage ethical risks. Overall, the study findings can be used by HEI management to improve the risk literacy of their staff, and to evaluate and improve existing HEI risk management frameworks.

Recommendations

WIL practitioners sought more information, guidance and access to strategies for managing ethical risk. Risk management training for practitioners should

be more deliberate, systematic and structured, and could eventually be a required competency for the role. Practitioners are largely unaware of what constitutes 'risk' and would benefit from risk management training relative to the wider HEI environment and specific to their co-op program. Decision-making models and risk management strategies should be aligned with controlling, transferring, reducing and avoiding risk in WIL.

Provincial and national associations should increase educational opportunities focused on risk management. Professional development involving the sharing of best practices is a peer modeling strategy consistent with the collaborative culture described by WIL practitioners in the study. David envisions a co-op ombudsman type position (maintained through CEWIL or the HEI)

where students and practitioners could bring ethical complaints and challenges, allowing for a more neutral approach and increased transparency in decision-making. Online educational materials could include curriculum and problem-solving scenarios describing how peer practitioners' approach ethical challenges. Webinars or an e-course on ethical issues (Clare) can provide a platform for discussing issues in a focused setting. Alice highlights on-line courses available to practitioners through the World Association for Cooperative and Work-Integrated Education (WACE) which presents a "broad spectrum of experiences and outcomes and questions" on how to approach "curious situations". Global educational tools could be expanded to include a stand-alone course on ethics (Chris). Existing ethical guidelines provided by CEWIL (CEWIL, 2020a) focuses solely on recruiting and sets out principles for the three key co-op stakeholders (employer, student, HEI). These guidelines could be expanded to incorporate ethical risk management during the co-op program.

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