Experiential learning and the university’s host community: rapid growth, contested mission and policy challenge

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Abstract
This paper examines the recent growth of experiential learning (EL) and the university-community (or so-called town-gown, TG) connections created as a result of this expansion. The research is framed by critical scholarship on the nature and role of the university and the place of liberal education specifically, as well as policy drivers aimed at social and economic impacts from EL. Two subthemes are also examined: first, the role of the arts, humanities and social sciences disciplines in EL expansion and, second, the extent to which TG connections focus on the university’s local host community as opposed to more distant and even international arrangements. Mixed research methods including public document analysis and key informant interviews are used to document and interpret EL developments across nine varied universities in Ontario, Canada. The results underline broad sector commitment to EL that in turn creates new and different TG connections for the university. Rapid expansion has brought a variety of challenges identified both by universities and community EL partners. The paper concludes with discussion of policy implications and consideration of the future of EL in light of the ‘digital pivot’ of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords Community · Experiential learning · Pedagogy · Ontario, Canada

Introduction

The relationship between the university and society involves a range of academic and non-academic issues. This paper is concerned with societal engagement as constituted by the core mission of the university, specifically its teaching and learning. Research and discovery play a leading role in university-community connections (e.g. technology transfer) however, teaching and learning, particularly experiential learning (EL), are taking on new and expanded roles in societal engagement. The focus of this paper is on the recent expansion of EL and the ways in which it creates new and different relationships between the university and the community.

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EL has a long history predating the rapid expansion evident over the last decade. The founding of the American state system of universities was based in social engagement as are the practica and clinical placements of professional programmes (e.g. social work). In this paper, we are concerned with the multidisciplinary groundswell of EL in recent years. Amidst this expansion, we are also interested in two subthemes: first, the place of the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) disciplines in this growth. The AHSS disciplines are increasingly called upon to demonstrate value and relevance. Given EL is often motivated by labour market and economic rationales, EL is a site through which this discourse can be analysed. Second, because the university sector as a whole is similarly called upon to demonstrate return on investment, we focus on local or so-called town-gown (TG) connections (Gavazzi, 2015) constituted by recent EL expansion. EL arrangements may occur in wide-ranging geographical scales including international arrangements. Our focus is on TG connections created in, with and for the university’s local host community.

The following section situates EL and TG within critical scholarship on the nature and role of the university and liberal education. This includes discussion of policy drivers behind the development of EL and its purported benefits for local labour markets and economies. The methods section details the research using document and website content analysis as well as key informant interviews. Nine universities are sampled from across Ontario’s large and diverse higher education system, including globally ranked research-intensive universities (e.g. University of Toronto) through primarily undergraduate institutions (e.g. Trent University). The results section then follows and underlines rapid EL expansion in Ontario that creates new TG connections across a broad base of universities and pedagogies. Expansion, however, has come with challenges. The paper concludes with discussion of implications for policy including prospects for EL and TG in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review: EL and TG connections

When examining the university’s societal engagement through the lens of the core mission of the university, research and discovery play an important role, particularly in relation to economic development (Nelles et al., 2005; Perkmann et al., 2013). In this view, the university is rightly embedded within a ‘triple helix’ with industry and government (Etzkowitz, 2008). The effect of this perspective is profound. For example, technology transfer is welcomed by those who call for economic returns on investment in universities (Markman et al., 2008). As elsewhere, in Ontario, Canada, policy discourse includes calls for institutional and system reform for relevance in a changing political economy (Clark et al., 2009). An important example here is Ontario’s Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA) sector planning framework: a novel centralised planning process initiated in 2012 by the province to shape institutions’ vision, mission and objectives (Buzzelli & Allison, 2017). A driver of the SMA framework is economic development through societal engagement as evidenced by performance metrics that tie institutional funding to private-source research revenue and economic impact (e.g. metrics on industry connections and licences/patents; Ontario, 2021).

By contrast, we ask to what extent and in what ways EL shapes university-community connections. Although research and discovery often fuel community connections, it appears that EL is ascendant in this regard (Norton, 2018; Schneijderberg et al., 2021). EL can take many forms such as paid or unpaid internships and co-op placements (often termed work-integrated learning, WIL) and community-engaged learning (e.g. learning in
service to community organisations), among others (HEQCO, 2016). Kolb (1984) is credited with motivating the EL movement by relating theory and practice through the learner’s experience, reflection and knowledge application. Deploying a representative definition, the University of Western Ontario (2019) defines EL as ‘an approach that educators use to intentionally connect learners with practical experiences that include guided reflection. EL allows learners to increase and apply disciplinary knowledge, develop transferable skills, clarify interests and values, strengthen career engagement and employability, and collaborate meaningfully with communities’. Thus, EL becomes the site of integration between workplace and campus through structured support and learner engagement with work experience (Billett, 2009).

As a connector and integrator of campus and community, EL differentiates and expands the university’s societal engagement. Already by 2015, half of all bachelor’s graduates in Canada had participated in some form of EL during their degree programme (Galarneau et al., 2020). And yet the policy push continues. Business and sector leaders have called for all Canadian undergraduates to have some form of EL during their studies (BHER (Business, Higher Education Roundtable), 2016). Indeed, the Canadian federal government made significant investments in 2017 with $73 million toward the Student Work-Integrated Learning Program and a Federal Budget line item of $221 M to connect students with industry through Mitacs (Government of Canada, 2017). And according to a Royal Bank of Canada (2018) report, Humans wanted, academic-industry gaps are a ‘quiet crisis’ that can be solved by meaningful experiences between higher education and the labour market. The bank’s president and CEO urged educators to look beyond degrees and encourage the placement of ‘all students’ into the world of work. As EL pedagogies expand, one appreciates how dramatically the university’s core educative mission is being reshaped in thought and in practice.

Expansion and diversification of EL is not without critique. Drawing on scholarship that views the university as neutral, non-partisan and independent, some argue the triple helix should rather be resisted (e.g. Giroux, 2007). Community connections open the possibility of mission drift away from independence and autonomy and toward marketisation and performance measurement, tenets of an economistic logic that commercialises the sector and erodes traditional academic values (Fisher et al., 2009; Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012; Polster, 2000). Ontario’s policy discourse is again indicative. EL has gained momentum across the sector as the province calls for employment-ready graduates (NSSE - National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014; Borwein, 2014; Sattler, 2011). The current SMA planning framework is a direct effort to connect students with labour market experiences through university performance-based funding tied specifically to EL (Ontario, 2021). Seen in this way, EL takes on very specific definition and identity, focusing on workforce readiness and graduate employability. Kolb (1984) might have accepted this as one specific instance of the broader philosophy of experiential education as espoused by Dewey and progressive education such as learning-by-doing movement. The distinction is important even if EL has become of the focus of expectations of graduates and is forcing institutions to consider adaptations to meet these expectations. As the nature and scope of the university’s teaching and learning mission confronts these pressures, feminist scholars, for example, have critiqued the taken-for-granted pedagogies and community relationships that may accompany EL (Castleden et al., 2013). Expedient relationships and student placements can fulfil performance metrics but subvert the critical consciousness of university pedagogy and curriculum (Luke & Gore, 2014; Mckinney, 2019). Milley (2016) echoes these arguments through case study in Ontario specifically, citing among other effects: unexamined co-op relationships with community partners, impacts on curriculum through notions
of relevance and creeping vocationalism and the learner’s potential inculcation of problematic labour market norms and behaviours.

A defence of liberal education is core to this critical scholarship and important to the present study. In broad terms, this defence reflects the university sector’s need to mediate between two foundational principles: on the one hand, to develop an engaged citizenry and democracy while, on the other, to serve the learner’s need to build a livelihood for a prosperous economy (Axelrod, 2002). More directly, the defence of liberal education counters persistent calls for the AHSS disciplines in particular to demonstrate relevance and value (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012; Polster, 2000). In the teaching and learning domain, graduates’ skills and employability are principally associated with STEM disciplines and are accompanied by growing reputation, resource share and enrollments (Lederer & Seasons, 2005; Peters et al., 2014). The notion of the creative class is perhaps the most popular argument to connect AHSS disciplines with local economic benefits (c.f. Bullen et al., 2004; Florida, 2019; Peck, 2005). Still, relative to STEM, AHSS disciplines are ever more challenged to find a place in the student’s schedule and the institutions’ curricula (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). The present paper asks if and how AHSS disciplines figure into emergent EL arrangements.

Finally, by definition, EL generates societal engagements that span local to global scales. The sector’s drive for global stature and prestige is well known (Addie et al., 2015; Levin, 2002) and may explain why international EL opportunities proliferate (Curran et al., 2018). A ‘mapping’ of institutional EL arrangements would be empirically helpful in order to delineate their scale and scope, such as the intersection of geographies and disciplines that may operate together for alternative offerings. Developing and maintaining partnerships and placements would seem to be more readily achieved within the university’s host community (Lazzeroni & Piccaluga, 2015). Moreover, unlike international connections, local TG connections are singularly shielded by territory, absolute ‘competitive advantage’ circumscribed by geography for exclusive university-host community relationships. For example, graduate retention in local economies is boosted by employment associated with EL opportunities (Massey et al., 2014). From this perspective, one understands Ontario’s SMA sector planning approach of performance funding linked to EL, itself nested within economic development goals. As with our inquiry into the role of AHSS, we also examine the nature and scope of local TG connections created by EL.

Research methods

A mixed-method approach was used in 2017/2018 to document and interpret how EL develops and works through TG connections (Clifford et al., 2008). The sampling frame for selecting study universities is the long-standing annual Canadian university rankings by Maclean’s magazine. Maclean’s university ranking focuses solely on Canadian domestic universities and publishes ranks within three discreet institutional categories: (1) ‘medical-doctoral’, incorporating universities with a medical school and a research-dedicated profile; (2) ‘comprehensive’, those with a balance of teaching and research; and (3) ‘primarily undergraduate’ institutions principally with a teaching focus. Unlike global university rankings featuring research and related measures (Dill & Soo, 2005; Holmes, 2018), the Maclean’s ranking incorporates teaching-related metrics. Accordingly, this sampling frame aids in selecting institutions for studying and identifying the potential influence of institutional ‘type’ on the nature and extent of EL development.
In the first phase of the research—policy document analysis—nine universities were selected from among the 20 universities in Ontario’s large and varied sector. Three universities were selected from each of the three 2018 Mclean’s ranking categories for a total sample of nine institutions (i.e. 3 Maclean’s categories × 3 institutions within each category = 9 selected). The three lead-ranked institutions within each Mclean’s category were selected (see Table 1). Web-based document collection was used to identify and gather all relevant institutional documents pertaining to EL with a target date range of 2012 to 2017 (i.e. a 5-year window for currency). A total of 128 documents were collected across all nine universities including policy documents, senate reports, universities’ bylaws, white papers and any other documents that generally described an EL relationship with host communities. In addition, these documents were either found within or complemented by 155 university websites with similarly pertinent information (included in ‘documents’ for simplicity).

Web-based public document search and collection involved additional steps for completeness of coverage. Often owing to pre-existing arrangements or historical factors, the document timeline was extended further back to ensure completeness. For general web searches (i.e. Google) and searches within institutional websites, ‘quotation marks’, dashes [-], keyword identifications (i.e. by use of ‘@’) and Boolean operators (i.e., and, or) were used for consistency and comprehensiveness. These steps ensured exact search matches, word exclusions and forced use of key words (e.g. ‘experiential’, ‘community’). Finally, informational interviews with key personnel at each selected university were undertaken in Fall 2017 to ensure currency and completeness of documentation. Table 1 summarises the document types and dates for each of the selected universities.

Turning to the second phase of the study, key informant interviews were completed for in-depth case studies of a subset of three universities. This phase complements the document content work and aids interpretation of the advent of EL and its TG connections (Opdenakker, 2006). One university-and-EL partner case was selected from each of the three categories of institutions from the document analysis phase. With research ethics approval in hand (Ethics Certificate I.D. 112,593), six telephone interviews were undertaken: one with key informants from each of the three universities selected and one with a respective local community EL partner (i.e. 3 university + 3 community EL partners = 6 interviews). Informants included university EL coordinators, programme administrators and similar contacts as well as community EL partner leaders (e.g. a company’s student liaison).

The key informant interview guide was semi-structured with broad questions and probes. Informants were asked about EL aims and objectives (Andrassy & Bruening, 2011; Stemler & Bebell, 1999); the tenure of EL programming and specific arrangements (coop, internship, CSL) of EL-based community connections (Howitt, 2019; OECD, 2018); who initiated, developed and maintains the EL connections, including whether AHSS disciplines are a target (Clarysse et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2004; Sadek et al., 2015; Siegel et al., 2003; Storey & Tether, 1998); challenges and opportunities including strengths and community benefits (Bruning et al., 2006; Mayo, 1997); and EL programme monitoring and evaluation. As semi-structured interviews, informants were afforded opportunities to discuss and explain their answers and were asked a concluding open-ended question ‘anything else to add’ (included a probe on future EL and TG partnerships). On average, the interviews lasted 50 min. Not all informants agreed to be identified requiring the use of pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity. As discussed in the next section, the interviews both affirmed insights from the document analysis and also added distinct and often critical findings not typically found in public-facing institutional websites and records.
Table 1  Sampling frame of Ontario universities selected for study

| University 'type' (Mclean's ranking category) | University name                | Location(s)                  | Document publication dates<sup>a</sup> | Number of documents (n = 128) | Number of websites (n = 155) | Informational interviews<sup>b</sup> |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Medical/Doctoral                             | University of Toronto          | Toronto                      | 2013–2018                              | 15                           | 27                           | 1, 3                             |
|                                              | Queen's University             | Kingston                     | 2005–2018                              | 18                           | 26                           | 1                                |
|                                              | McMaster University            | Hamilton                     | 2009–2018                              | 13                           | 16                           | 1, 3                             |
| Comprehensive                                | University of Waterloo         | Waterloo,                   | 2013–2018                              | 16                           | 15                           | 2                                |
|                                              | University of Guelph           | Toronto, Guelph Ridgetown    | 2003–2018                              | 13                           | 21                           | 2                                |
|                                              | Carleton University            | Ottawa                       | 2015–2018                              | 11                           | 10                           | 1, 3                             |
| Primarily Undergraduate                      | Trent University               | Peterborough and Durham      | 2014–2018                              | 17                           | 13                           | 2                                |
|                                              | University of Ontario Institute of Technology | Oshawa                  | 2005–2018                              | 7                            | 6                            | 1                                |
|                                              | Lakehead University            | Thunder Bay, Orillia         | 2017–2018                              | 18                           | 21                           | 1                                |

<sup>a</sup>As discussed, the target date range for document collected was 2012–2018; however, some date ranges were extended because of pre-existing arrangements or historical factors

<sup>b</sup>Informational interviews: 1, contact and replied (no further materials); 2, contacted, no reply; 3, contacted, provided further public domain materials not previously found
**EL growth, challenges and tensions**

The document content analysis generated a number of themes tied to the growth of EL. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, in some instances, EL arrangements predated the 2012–2017 document collection timeframe (Queen’s, McMaster, Guelph, UOIT). Others appear to have developed recently (e.g. Toronto, Carleton, Trent). The breadth of commitment to EL was apparent. Consider Trent University’s Associate Vice-President’s reflections on opportunities and challenges (Trent University, 2018) for EL and TG to (1) increase student engagement and academic success, (2) enhance student employability on graduation, (3) improve student retention, (4) strengthen community partnerships and (5) create robust and innovative undergraduate and graduate research programmes. Similarly, through its special committee on ‘Experiential and Work-Integrated Learning; (launched April 2017), the University of Toronto (2017, p.7) stated:

> …work-integrated and experiential learning (WIL/EL) opportunities can play an important role in enhancing the educational experiences of students. The University currently offers a broad range of WIL/EL…We will expand these offerings further… in a manner that maintains our high standard of academic quality and maximizes the learning benefit to students.

The stated commitment to EL by these two very different universities, together with the document contents summarised in Tables 1 and 2, indicates a rising tide among all nine institutions studied.

It bears noting here that Waterloo also exhibited recent developments; however, its historical status as ‘the co-op University’ (McCallum and Wilson, 1988) predates the timeframe of this study (and underlines the need for complementary methods. In tracing the history of co-op education at Waterloo to its roots as a fledgeling university, McCallum and Wilson, 1988, 65) note ‘…those original 75 students in 1957 have grown to over 9,000 in 1987 – the second largest co-op program in the world’. Notwithstanding its history, Waterloo’s new ‘EDGE’ certificate launched in 2017 underlines expansion across the sector. EDGE certification complements degree offerings for ‘regular’ (i.e. non-co-op) students with EL opportunities earned by completion of a skill identification and articulation workshop, a career development course, qualifying work and/or community experiences paired with a professional development course and a final capstone workshop (University of Waterloo, 2017). Institutions with longer tenure in EL offerings, together with newer entrants, mark EL as ascendant across this sample of universities and, ostensibly, the sector as a whole.

Table 2 enumerates the document and website contents by institution and identifies selected key documents for each as well as themes specific to each university. Across the nine institutions, we identify six principal themes: (1) career and job-ready students, a theme identified by eight of nine universities and including discussion of students’ more positive views of learning and higher employment rates as a result of EL (e.g. McMaster (2017)); (2) resources and funding, including discussion of financial support, (un)plaid EL placements and identification of funding sources (e.g. University of Guelph, 2018); (3) as discussed by all nine institutions, new pedagogies and uses of technologies made possible by EL though with notable variation in terminologies and descriptions among them (e.g. ‘community engaged pedagogy’ and ‘community-based learning’, see Carleton University (2018)); (4) academic credit, evaluation and feedback, including the need
| University type      | University name          | Publication dates | Selected key documents                                                                 | Selected key themes                           |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Medical/Doctoral     | University of Toronto    | 2013–2018         | - Strategic Mandate Agreements<br>- Community-Engaged Learning Course<br>- Center for Teaching & Learning annual reports<br>- Global engagement reports (2017–2018) | - Student work experience<br>- Skilled Workforce Strategy<br>- Experiential knowledge<br>- Placement and learning<br>- Pedagogy and technology |
| Queen’s University   | 2005–2018                |                   | - Co-operative education manual<br>- Experiential Learning Project Report (2017–2018)<br>- Strategic Mandate Agreement<br>- Kingston ECDEV Strategic Plan – 2015–2020 | - Institutional Partnerships<br>- Systematic Training<br>- Canadian workplaces<br>- Learning environment<br>- Partnership with industry |
| McMaster University  | 2009–2018                |                   | - Social Science Internship Handbook<br>- Strategic Mandate Agreements<br>- McMaster Un. Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines<br>- McMaster Co-op hiring process | - Strategic financial support<br>- Outcomes-based funding<br>- Experiential entrepreneurship<br>- Instructor effectiveness<br>- Field experience |
| Comprehensive        | University Waterloo     | 2013–2018         | - Student placement program<br>- Centre for Teaching & Learning annual reports<br>- Strategic Mandate Agreements<br>- The University of Waterloo and Work-Integrated Learning | - Research through mentorship<br>- Student Experience<br>- Resources for WIL<br>- WIL and institutional reputation<br>- High impact practices |
| University of Guelph | 2003–2018                |                   | - University of Guelph SMA<br>- Experiential Learning Assessment Guide<br>- Human Rights at Work | - Systematic training<br>- Highly skilled workforce strategy<br>- Academic credit through WIL<br>- Workplace-based learning<br>- Community engagement |
| Carleton University  | 2015–2018                |                   | - Carleton University SMA<br>- Carleton University Experiential Learning Challenges<br>- Ontario Government WIL Mandate<br>- Community First: Community Engagement (CFICE) | - Student Experiences<br>- Community engagement<br>- Programme delivery methods<br>- Career and job-ready students<br>- Community first |
| University type                  | University name          | Publication dates | Selected key documents                                                                                     | Selected key themes                                                                 |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Primarily undergraduate         | Trent University         | 2014–2018         | - Strategic Mandate Agreements<br>- Trent Centre for Community-Based Education<br>- Co-op, Career Services & Experiential Learning<br>- Student Retention and Success | - Innovative practice<br>- Credit for placement<br>- Learning experience and career preparedness<br>- Social entrepreneurship |
| University of Ontario Institute of Technology | 2005–2018                              | - Strategic Mandate Agreements<br>- Faculty and Unit Action Plans/Strategic Plans<br>- Practicum Manuals<br>- UOIT Integrated Academic Plan | - Hands-on learning experiences<br>- Research partnerships<br>- Unite community<br>- Entrepreneurial scholarships<br>- Teaching and learning with faculty |
| Lakehead University             | 2017–2018                | - Work Integrated Learning Modules<br>- RBC report on humans wanted<br>- A Practical Guide for Work-integrated Learning<br>- Strategic Mandate Agreements | - Classroom and a workplace<br>- Funding WIL programmes<br>- Credit for all placements<br>- Community work/meaningful WIL placements |
to properly account for EL in the student’s record as well as mitigation of difficulties that may arise with placements (e.g. McMaster University, 2017); (5) workplace and field experience, with all nine institutions identifying the value of exposure to alternative environments and development of professional networks (University of Guelph, 2018); and (6) engagement and partnerships with the external community, especially via service learning approaches (e.g. University of Waterloo, 2018). In addition, the material collected here included consistent mention of cross-cutting themes of entrepreneurship, mentorship and leadership. Thus, publicly available documents capture the motivations, logistics and resourcing issues that accompany growth, including indications of how it creates new and different TG connections. The material fits the broad framing of the motivations for EL and TG discussed earlier, including concerns raised by critical scholarship about the university’s mission, the place of liberal education and impacts on pedagogy and learning.

Table 3 extends these insights for the thematic foci of this study. First, regarding pedagogies, there exists a wide range of educational opportunities for providing student EL placements. These reach well beyond co-ops and internships to service learning, various short- and long-term activities and placements both near and farther afield. The absence of ‘labs’ at Toronto is noteworthy: suggesting either the university does not include labs as EL-qualifying or its public documents simply do not specify this criterion. A sub-question posed earlier is whether those universities more focused on teaching and learning (rather than medical/doctoral research institutions) would exhibit greater EL development. As shown in Table 3, however, growth appears to be independent of institution type. Second is discipline mix. STEM appear in eight of nine universities; half of these offering exclusively STEM-focused EL. AHSS disciplines were present in five institutions’ EL offerings but exclusively only in one (Trent). Perhaps signalling a remixing of disciplines is the Queen’s Undergraduate Internship Program

| University type          | University name                   | Pedagogies found in policy documents | Disciplinary focus | Geographical scope of EL |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Medical/Doctoral         | University of Toronto             | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10           | 1                  | 1,3                      |
|                          | Queen’s University                | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5                       | 1, 2               | 1                        |
|                          | McMaster University               | 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10                   | 1                  | 1,3                      |
| Comprehensive            | University Waterloo               | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9                    | 1, 2               | 1,3                      |
|                          | University of Guelph              | 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10                   | 1                  | 1                        |
|                          | Carleton University               | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10          | 1, 2               | 1,3                      |
| Primarily undergraduate  | Trent University                  | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8                    | 1, 2, 3            | 1,3                      |
|                          | University of Ontario Institute of Technology | 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 | 2 | 1 |
|                          | Lakehead University               | 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 10                   | 1, 2               | 1,2                      |

Pedagogies/labels used to describe EL placement types: 1, co-ops, internships; 2, mentorships; 3, workshops and networking; 4, Incubators/accelerators; 5, community-engaged learning; 6, practicum; 7, leadership; 8, international exchange; 9, labs; 10, fieldwork

Disciplinary focus: 1, science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM; 2, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, AHSS

Geographical Scope of EL: 1, local; 2, non-local or satellite campus; 3, international
(QUIP) of paid 12-to-16-month placements. Although previously focused on STEM, its mandate extended to students in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Creative Arts and Languages. Finally, the most consistent pattern shown in Table 3 pertains to EL’s geographical scope: all nine institutions have local arrangements. Queen’s, Guelph and UOIT seem to offer solely local EL. Here too, institution type does not differentiate TG connections created by EL.

In general, the nine study universities point to EL growth on a broad foundation of institution types and alternative pedagogies. Public documents and websites indicate substantive, logistical and resourcing issues in this rapid growth. Not unexpectedly, STEM disciplines dominate the EL connections though some traction is evident for AHSS disciplines. The most consistent insight into EL expansion is its local TG underpinnings. From the documents and websites of the nine institutions examined, it appears that EL and TG are mutually constitutive of new and different societal engagement.

The key informant interviews offer first-hand insights into the nature and scope of TG connections constitute by the rising tide of EL. As noted earlier, all informants are anonymised for confidentiality (denoted university informants U1, U2, U3 and, respectively, EL community partner organisations C1, C2, C3). Some themes from the content analysis appeared again in the interviews. For example, all university-based informants emphasised career and job-readiness as a policy goal for EL programming. Community partners added the importance of students’ exposure to workplace environments in their understanding and development of career goals. The funding and resources theme was also echoed in the interviews by university and community informants alike.

The research interviews also offered new insights beyond the document analysis. A notable finding concerns EL programme evaluation. U1 and U3 referred to ‘lapses’ in collecting student feedback to understand progress or problem areas. C1 suggested that these kinds of lapses may be due to university bureaucratic inertia or lack of real commitment to the student experience. That said, U3 referred to a recent initiative to capture both student and community partner feedback at mid- and endpoints of EL placements. C3 independently concurred in their interview, stating that the approach could leverage the very core competency of their organisation in the marketplace that is also the basis of student EL placements: advanced data collection and analytics (such as artificial intelligence) to capture learners’ development of such ‘attributes’ as empathy and persuasion. At the same time, C3 also remarked that university ‘bureaucracies and fear of private sector intrusion into traditional academic circles’ may be barriers to embracing such approaches. In general, university and community partner leaders expressed discontent with the absence of evaluative mechanisms and thereby the potential limits to understanding EL successes and shortcomings.

The interviews also furnished insights into the AHSS theme. As noted earlier, STEM-based EL dominates though there appears to be growth and interest in AHSS-based arrangements. Informants U1, U2 and U3 confirmed this trend. U1 states:

[about one-third] of our EL students are in the arts and social sciences and we have about [one-third] in public affairs. The Faculty of Science forms 15% of our students enrolled whereas Engineering...have about 10%. About 10% of our students are enrolled from...business and continuing education...

U2, U3 and C3 added that employers are increasingly interested in graduates with skill sets in the AHSS disciplines and that placements based on these areas involve ‘non-traditional, non-research, non-STEM disciplines’ in work and arrangements that are qualitatively new to the EL landscape. In general, it could be argued that AHSS
disciplines still lag in the EL domain but represent growth potential and may be fundamentally motivated by the differentiated skills and competencies of these fields of study.

The nature and extent of TG connections constituted by EL was also examined in the interviews. While U2 clearly preferred international EL, citing student ‘global fluency’ and ‘cultural consciousness’ beyond the ‘local environment’, U1 and U3 took the opposite view. For the latter, local EL connections were favoured for their ease of coordination, local networking and student retention within the host city after graduation. U3 went further to explain that institutional policy development is motivated by the twin aims of student’s career development as well as community engagement. Asserting the importance of ‘breathing real-world air’, U3 said that EL was important for both the student’s entry in the labour force and the university’s service to the local community through post-graduation talent retention. U3 stated:

…IOntario is experiencing skills shortage and labour force shrinkage. So, there are pushes on through all levels of government...[and]... economic development initiatives and through the university to encourage graduates to stay in the community or its environs. So, we feel that by making these connections and building these networks for students and making them members of the chamber of commerce and all those sorts of things that students develop an awareness of what opportunities are here.

Though views were mixed among university key informants, economic development in the form of talent attraction and retention (i.e. students) and service to the local community and economy are motivators for EL development and expansion.

Finally, key informant interviews were effective at uncovering important gaps and challenges. In addition to the absence of programme evaluation, informants also identified skill mismatches between students and placement opportunities, lack of awareness of opportunities, logistical issues such as scheduling and timing and various relationship issues between universities and partners such as shared understanding of expectations of all parties (including learners). Each of these is worthy of further study. But one theme emerged consistently among informants: university (de)centralisation of EL leadership, development and coordination. Again, threads of this issue lay in the document analysis. For example, in 2015 Queen’s established its campus-wide EL ‘hub’ with a mandate to develop and grow self-sustaining, curricular and co-curricular experiential education opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students (Queen’s University, 2015). A similar approach is evident in the Trent Community Research Centre (formerly the Trent Centre for Community-Based Education), a long-standing unit that incorporated EL in 2018 (Trent University, 2018). The Faculty of Social Science at McMaster set up an Experiential Education Unit in order to foster strong relationships between academic studies, career exploration and the community (McMaster University, 2017).

Perhaps because documents are public facing, however, the issue of institutional centralisation does not manifest as a challenge or self-critique. The interviews brought this to the fore. Several informants—U1, U2, C2 and U3—shared their understanding of challenges caused by diffuse EL development and community connections. U2 put it this way:

I would say that we are decentralized and that [centralisation] was based on a recommendation from our experiential learning [think tank] report...one of the recommendations that came out of that was in order to manage the growth of EL then we need to move to a more centralized model and the EL is one of the first steps.
In this light, the McMaster example of an Experiential Education Unit situated within a single faculty may be a window on the organisational challenge of whether and how to centralise EL programming, at the course, unit and/or institutional level. A parallel competition-versus-collaboration dynamic resides here (Lederer & Seasons, 2005). In a diffuse EL system where EL is activated at the course levels, community partners become resources to be competed for by multiple campus agents such as course instructors. By contrast, centralisation within the university can result in courses (i.e. faculty members) competing for the services of pooled resources within the university itself in order to access external EL placement opportunities (e.g. working through an EL hub). The tension, then, is one of TG collaboration having to work through seemingly inevitable competition imbued in alternative models. As the university confronts this tension, missteps can impact its sense of community and traditional academic values (Broström et al., 2019). Community partners see this as well. C2 and C3 paint an ideal centralised situation where university and community partners are in ‘sync’ to avoid complex networks of linkages. Perhaps the flourishing of EL has imbued the very TG connections it creates with an inherent challenge: that both universities and community partners must ‘negotiate’ the structure of their operations and interactions while fulfilling commitments to learners and new pedagogies.

Conclusions and discussion

The nine study institutions exhibit rapid expansion of EL in Ontario across a broad base of medical/doctoral, comprehensive and primarily undergraduate ‘university types’. The same can be said of the range of EL pedagogies deployed. Against this backdrop of EL expansion, two foci of this paper—the place of AHSS disciplines and the geographical scope of TG connections—were examined in detail. Perhaps unsurprisingly, STEM disciplines still dominate EL offerings. This may reflect that STEM disciplines have long been the source of university social engagement, broadly defined, often for research-related activities. AHSS disciplines appear to be gaining and represent potential growth; their unique skills perhaps the justification for EL expansion in this direction. There are indications that a deeper dive may reveal a subset of specific disciplines whose histories, pedagogies and curricula play a disproportionate role in EL-based community engagement (Šima et al., 2017). Moreover, both the document analysis and research interviews revealed what may be the most consistent characteristic of EL development: the local geographical nature of TG connections. It appears that the rising tide of EL in the sector favours local connectedness over regional, national and even international alternatives. Ease of operation and territorial advantage may be at play. As with pedagogies and disciplines, institution type did not alter the preponderance of local connections for EL between the university and community partners. A dynamic and reciprocal relationship is emerging that connects the university principally to its host community for the teaching and learning mission.

As discussed, a number of logistical and resourcing issues have emerged with EL expansion. Two issues in particular were noteworthy and may even operate in tandem. The first is a commonly neglected feature of new programme/policy development: the absence of in-built evaluation. This suggests undue time to develop processes and data to understand EL strengths and weakness. Similarly, rapid expansion of EL also came with too little thought given to organisational structure, specifically how the university would interface with the community. A centralisation-versus-decentralisation dilemma was noted by both university and partner key informants. This tension is bound up with questions such as how the
university adapts internally (administratively and/or academically) to meet external commitments as well as course and programme academic freedom. Ideally, as EL expands, universities and community partners would negotiate these challenges with data and evidence for further development and refinement. Key informant UC reflected on this with respect to the ‘unknown’ impact of EL on student workload: ‘Although the goal is that students come out of this program and are more workplace-ready than they went in…. we realize that it is a commitment for the student on top of what is already heavy course load’. Stakeholder parties may be unaware of concerns like these in the absence of clear organisational thinking and dedicated programme evaluation. We have noted throughout our paper the impact of developments on learning and the learner specifically. Any evaluation of EL (re) development ought to take into account—perhaps foreground—the learner’s experiences and outcomes.

These results lead us back to critical scholarship on university autonomy and the place of liberal education. The economic development rationale revealed in the document and interview materials may point to an emergent ‘triple helix’ in the teaching and learning mission and EL. The finding is laudable to those who argue for relevance and return on investment, including proponents of policy approaches like Ontario’s SMA system planning framework outlined earlier. For others, however, the evidence of an economic rationale behind EL and TG connections will be of concern, as will the place of AHSS. As discussed earlier, the pursuit of relevance may diminish or displace the critical consciousness of university pedagogy and curriculum that reside within AHSS disciplines. From this point of view, the emergence of such arrangements should be resisted prima facie. Given EL is now in place, its evaluation and refinement must be equally critically informed: asking such questions as how curriculum is activated in placements or the extent to which experiences impart meaningful professional discovery and self-reflection. This again raises the distinction between what may be an emerging and narrow understanding and implementation of EL, on the one hand, and the broader experiential education philosophy, on the other. Implementation and evaluation may reify simple and utilitarian versions of EL without engagement in the wider pedagogies and spirit of education and learning by doing. The AHSS disciplines in particular present an institutional ‘heuristic’: revealing at once what may be lost in simple and utilitarian metrics for EL while possessing the attributes to elevate EL to its promise for the entire fraternity of disciplines.

Although the economic rationale behind Ontario’s higher education policy discourse is contested, it is shared by other systems in Canada and elsewhere (e.g. Björck, 2021). Now in ‘Wave 3’, 2020–2025, Ontario’s SMA approach seeks to elicit ‘employment-ready’ graduates from universities. In this respect, the document and interview material suggest policy success: rapid EL expansion across a range of universities, pedagogies and disciplines and a marked local connectedness. Speed has also wrought institutional, logistical and resource uncertainties and challenges. If these can be addressed via refined structures and process, then rapid expansion may give way to stabilisation and further policy success. Paradoxically, however, success on these fronts may solidify EL and TG as the new loci of mission drift away from the university’s critical consciousness, independence and freedom.

Finally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic bears reflection here because of its potential, some would argue, to fundamentally reshape the nature and scope of EL. The pandemic occurred at the very moment that EL and TG were gaining momentum. And the pandemic did so with a decisive ‘digital pivot’ to online delivery. Was the pivot a temporary measure for a passing pandemic or will it have lasting impact on the nature of academic work, including teaching and learning? There are indications that the pandemic is accelerating digitalisation in other sectors (Amankwah-Amoah et al, 2021). Ryerson University in
Toronto, Canada, may be a harbinger. In September, 2021, President Mohamed Lachemi announced the results of Ryerson’s Future of Work Project (formerly Agile Workforce Project; accessed 23 September 2021 at https://www.ryerson.ca/future-of-work/news/2021/09/the-future-of-work-at-ryerson/). Stating his institution’s new commitment to a ‘hybrid workforce model’, the plan calls for leaders and staff in academic and administrative units to co-develop new and permanent work arrangements for ‘…a stronger, more robust, more flexible approach to serving our community’.

In light of this kind of development, the present research motivates questions and research along many avenues. For example, if Ryerson exhibits any of the same (de)centralisation tensions found here, does a new ‘hybrid’ model complicate the issue? Can we answer if hybrid implementation, too, is not accompanied by evaluation? A more fundamental concern is whether EL can maintain its pedagogical promise. Does digital pedagogy limit meaningful professional discovery and self-reflection in the absence of actual (place)ments or, indeed, is it a must for learners facing an ever more online future? Either way, the notion of the digital divide suggests that the impacts are likely to be uneven, exacerbating social inequalities in an already complex environment of EL expansion. Thus, whether in person, online or hybrid, EL and its TG connections will continue to be sites of institutional mission and policy choices and challenges.

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