

Ethical risks in work-integrated learning: A study of Canadian practitioners

CRAIG CAMERON¹

Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia

CHRISTINE DODDS

Capilano University, Vancouver, Canada

CYNTHIA MACLEAN

British Columbia Institute of Technology, Vancouver, Canada

WIL practitioners encounter ethical issues, dilemmas, or conflicts ('risks') in the delivery of work-integrated learning (WIL) programs. Ethical risks which are not properly managed can have reputational, legal, and financial consequences for the higher education institution (HEI). Whilst students' experiences of ethical risks, particularly in health-related WIL programs, have been extensively reported in the literature, there is no known systematic study that has explored ethical risks in WIL from the sole perspective of WIL practitioners. A case study of 10 Canadian practitioners identifies five key characteristics of ethics underpinning the delivery of co-operative education programs, as well as ethical risks that they have experienced relating to the conduct of WIL practitioners, students, and employers. The findings can be applied by WIL stakeholders to enhance their ethical awareness, and to improve management of ethical risks.

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

This article presents a case study of ethical risks in work-integrated learning (WIL) from the perspective of co-operative education practitioners in Canada. Co-operative education (or 'co-op') is a form of work-integrated learning, and a WIL practitioner is an employee of the higher education institution (HEI) involved with the management and/or delivery of WIL programs. Students on co-op complete paid work-terms to gain experience in a workplace setting relevant to their field of study. Work-terms either alternate with terms of traditional study, or are taken back-to-back, and represent a significant component of the students' overall academic program (Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada. 2018a).

HEIs are exposed to ethical issues, dilemmas, or conflicts ('risks') associated with the delivery of WIL programs. The ethical risks can occur before, during or after the student's time in the workplace, and may involve the student, host organization (being an employer in co-op), and HEI as well as their representatives. The manifestation of these risks may have serious financial, reputational and legal consequences for HEIs, and may impact their goal of delivering WIL opportunities to students (Cameron, 2017). Further, WIL practitioners who fail to identify and manage ethical risks may also create what Feudtner (1994) describes as 'ethical erosion' among students. WIL can be a means of developing students' ethical awareness so that they are 'profession-ready' to be 'critical moral agents' in their workplace (Zegwaard, Campbell, & Pretti, 2017). It can be argued that WIL practitioners, as educators, also need to be critical moral leaders in the delivery of WIL programs. A WIL practitioner without the ethical awareness to identify and manage risks may be unable to provide the education, modelling, and support to develop profession-ready students with ethical awareness.

¹ Corresponding author: Craig Cameron, craig.cameron@griffith.edu.au

The next section reviews the literature examining ethics and ethical risks in WIL programs. This review is followed by a summary description of the case study methodology, including case selection, interview design, data collection and data analysis. The results of the case study are then presented and discussed. In particular, WIL practitioners articulated five characteristics of ethics (equity, integrity, transparency, care, and adherence to rules) that relate to ethical risks associated with their conduct, and the conduct of students and employers. The article concludes with practical applications of the research for WIL stakeholders and future research opportunities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethics in Work-Integrated Learning

Authors generally do not define ethics when studying ethical risks, which is understandable. Ethics is not objective but is constructed by the interpretations, assumptions and experiences of the research participant. Given that ethics is a social construct, it is however surprising that the existing literature has not explored the research participants' own interpretations of ethics as part of a broader study of ethical risks in WIL programs. Some authors apply their research findings to existing ethical standards or codes as a means of categorizing the ethical risk (Dodd, 2007; Han & Ahn, 2000), or develop their own definition of ethical risk, and then seek to categorize participant experiences as an ethical or non-ethical (or practice) issue (Ricks, 2003). Consistent with a constructivist paradigm (Bryman, 2012), the study reported in this article advances the existing literature by exploring WIL practitioners' interpretations and meanings attached to ethics as a basis for contextualizing and understanding their experiences of ethical risks in WIL programs.

Ethical Risks in Work-Integrated Learning

Empirical studies in WIL predominantly examine ethical risks from the perspective of students in health-related disciplines. Medical students' ethical concerns on international WIL placements, most notably in low-income countries, relate to the diversion of scarce resources away from patients to supervise the student, and the performance of clinical tasks that exceed the student's competency and training (Elit et al., 2011; Withers et al., 2017). In domestic WIL programs, nursing students have identified breaches of patient confidentiality/privacy, the conduct of doctors and nurses towards patients, and the conflict between student and patient values, as the main ethical risks (Cameron, Schaffer & Park, 2001; Erdil & Korkmaz, 2009; Han & Ahn, 2000). Dental and social work students have experienced conflict with professionals over proposed treatments and decisions, poor patient care, as well as the financial capacity of the patient to pay for their proposed treatment (Dodd, 2007; Sharp, Kuthy & Heller, 2005; Verma, Mohanty, Nawal, & Saini, 2013). Medical students have similarly reported ethical issues regarding treatment decisions, patient communication such as misleading a patient or not disclosing a medical error to a patient, professionalism of host staff, quality of patient care and host supervision of the student (Fard, Asghari, & Mirzazadeh, 2010; Feudtner, 1994; Kaldjian et al., 2012).

WIL practitioners experience a variety of ethical risks during WIL programs. However, their experiences have not, to date, been the subject of systematic study. Authors generally describe their own experiences as a practitioner (Johnston-Goodstar, 2012; Neil-Smith, 2001; Surbeck, 2013), or ethical issues are raised as part of a broader study exploring risk or challenges in WIL programs from multiple stakeholder perspectives (Newhook, 2013; Rook, 2017). For instance, Watkinson and Chalmers (2008) described the ethical breach of a social work student with a disability who became involved in the personal affairs of a client, whereas Mark (2001) identified unethical student behaviors including theft,

making unauthorized overseas calls, abuse of email and internet in the workplace, forged timesheets, leaving the job, not showing up for interviews or responding to phone calls, and wrongfully filing for unemployment benefits. A study by McFarlane, Ricks, and Field (1999) provided additional insight about WIL practitioner experiences of ethical risks. The authors surveyed, by written questionnaire, ethical dilemmas of faculty, co-operative education coordinators, workplace supervisors and students. Non-compliance with policy was the most cited ethical dilemma by WIL practitioners. They reported making exceptions to policy, such as enabling students to complete traditional course work during their co-op placement or adjusting a student's course load. Ricks (2003) described these issues as a "value conflict of the best interest of the individual student versus being fair to other students who follow the policy" (p.61). The qualitative study reported in this article extends the existing literature by focusing on WIL practitioner experiences of ethical risks, across multiple disciplines, in relation to co-op programs. Overall, the empirical gaps in the literature raised two research questions:

1. What is ethics in the delivery of co-operative education programs?
2. What ethical risks do WIL practitioners manage in co-operative education programs?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Case Study

The research design is part of a collective case study (Stake, 1995) of 10 WIL practitioners in Canada exploring ethics, ethical risk and risk management. Risk management by WIL practitioners was outside the scope of this article. Case selection was guided by maximum variation sampling techniques and the research purpose of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of ethical risk pertaining to co-op programs. As such, an initial condition of selection was that practitioners had to possess three years' experience in delivering and/or managing co-op programs. Practitioners were selected from multiple sites in Canada, and then stratified according to the demographic characteristics as outlined in the case typology (Table 1). Approximately half of the research participants reported involvement in multiple disciplines, and this is represented in the case typology. The 'co-op office size' refers to the number of WIL practitioners working with the research participant in co-op programs.

Interview Design

The interview design, which received ethics approval (BCIT 2017-34), included a mix of semi-structured and structured interview questions. The initial demographic questions were structured, whereas the remaining questions were more open ended, with follow up questions and prompts and probes designed to garner practitioner interpretations of ethics, and their experiences of ethical risk. Telephone and face-to-face interviews ranging from 25 minutes to 60 minutes in length were conducted, recorded and transcribed for the case study. The authors used reflexivity, eclectic coding and pattern coding to analyze the data (Saldana, 2013). In terms of reflexivity, each author maintained a reflective journal during data collection and analysis which included observations about each interview, general observations about the research, as well as potential codes, categories, themes and assertions. The interview data from each case was initially coded by all authors using eclectic coding techniques. The lead author was then responsible for analyzing the reflective journals, and the codes extracted from the data of all WIL practitioners (or cases), to generate categories, themes and assertions. The data is presented as a cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009) of ethics and ethical risks experienced by participants, who are given a pseudonym in the study to maintain anonymity and promote readability.

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

RESULTS

Ethics

Ethics in the context of co-op relates to how students, employers and WIL practitioners should conduct themselves before, during and after a student's work-term. WIL practitioner responses revealed five characteristics of ethical conduct: equity; integrity; transparency; care; and adherence to rules. Equity means that all students and employers are treated fairly within their respective stakeholder groups, and between stakeholder groups (David, Kate, Lisa, Steve). Equity between stakeholder groups requires the WIL practitioner to balance student, HEI and employer interests when making decisions. As Steve puts it, "... we're ultimately trying to make, holistically, the best decision for the student, the college and our employer base". In relation to recruitment, equity requires WIL practitioners to provide co-op opportunities to all qualified students (Kate), and for employers and students to have equal access to co-op: "most students feel like they have an equal shot at all the jobs, for instance, and employers feel like they have an equal chance to secure a student" (David).

Transparency involves clear and timely communication by WIL practitioners with staff, students and employers, and about the WIL program in general (David, John). For example, transparency requires WIL practitioners to make qualified students aware of co-op and its benefits (Kate). Honesty and disclosure by employers and students are two important characteristics of transparency. For instance, Sarah has experienced "issues of deliberate obfuscation, and that presents an ethical dilemma whether it's an employer or a student not fully describing the challenge that they've dealt with". Integrity is about stakeholders 'doing the right thing', which includes taking responsibility for conduct during co-op (Lisa, Sarah), and remaining engaged as a partner in the student's education during the co-op program (Chris, John). Integrity guides Chris' decision-making. When confronted with an ethical risk, Chris asks this question: "what's the right thing to do here?"

WIL practitioners described the ethic of care towards students. They suggested that greater care was required in co-op programs compared to traditional study programs because of the students' lack of workplace experience (Lisa), and the greater involvement WIL practitioners have in students' lives before and during the work-term (Steve). Relationship management was the primary theme underpinning care by WIL practitioners to employers (Alice, Chris, Clare, Greg, Kate, Lisa). Rules that apply to co-op include external rules or laws, as well as internal rules, such as policies, procedures and guidelines, set by the HEI or the employer. WIL practitioners focused on the importance of all stakeholders adhering to internal rules which were influenced by ethics or morals (Chris, Clare). Rules can guide decision-making when presented with an ethical risk (Chris, John, Steve) and enable the WIL practitioner to maintain objectivity when completing tasks and delivering the co-op program (Chris). Conversely, in the absence of rules, ethics can be a "grey area" for the WIL practitioner to navigate (John).

Ethical Risks

WIL practitioners described ethical risks in co-op relating to their own conduct, as well as employer and student conduct. Appendix A provides a summary of the ethical risks. The ethical characteristic(s), as identified by WIL practitioners, which relate to the risk is represented in Appendix A as an issue (individual characteristic) or a conflict/dilemma between ethical characteristics (characteristic vs characteristic). This descriptive statistic provides context as to why the stakeholder conduct is an ethical risk.

WIL practitioner conduct

WIL practitioners have accepted students into a co-op program despite HEI rules which perform a gatekeeping function. The HEI rules may prohibit the student's entry into the program or give the WIL practitioner a discretion to accept the student, thereby enabling the WIL practitioner to make an exception to the rule. In either scenario, WIL practitioners may create their own rules, which are influenced by an ethic of care towards the student and employer. Steve accepts students, albeit they have failed to meet pre-requisite study requirements, provided that the student possesses the generic skills and has the appropriate training and support from the employer to achieve the learning outcomes of the co-op program. Kate allows students to apply for co-op, albeit they do not meet the grade point average (GPA) entry requirement, on the basis that the students' soft skills, and not their GPA, is the primary concern of employers. To be eligible for Kate's exception, the student must demonstrate the initiative to approach the WIL practitioner, explain why their GPA is below the requisite level, and have a plan for improving their GPA. The ethical risk that Kate grapples with is student equity. The promotional material for co-op makes clear the GPA requirement as a barrier to entry, but not all students will have access to the exception created by Kate if they do not approach the co-op office. Alice described the additional pressure to accept students who have paid a fee to register for co-op, but do not meet the GPA requirements. Alice questioned whether accepting a student who was not appropriate for co-op, rather than refunding the fee, was in the employer or student's best interests.

WIL practitioners may enable students to complete an additional co-op despite HEI rules which limit the number of co-ops during the degree (Alice, David, Kate). For David, the ethical risk relates to equity – "Now is it fair for me to allow the student to do another work-term knowing that this student might be taking away an opportunity for another student to do a work-term?". Students may also request another work-term due to a history of poor performance or misconduct on previous work-terms. Alice's ethical conflict was between maintaining the integrity of the co-op program and exercising care

towards the student by providing another co-op opportunity. The student may not have learned from their previous mistakes, they are entering a new workplace, and another failure on co-op may damage Alice and the HEI's relationship with the employer.

WIL practitioners have also accepted students into co-op who have completed, or will complete, their degree requirements during their work-term, despite a HEI rule that students must return to the HEI and complete traditional coursework following co-op. Alice enables students to make a case for inclusion, and then reflects on why an exception should be made for that student and not others, as part of her decision-making process. Kate allowed a student to complete their work-term, albeit that the student had met the requirements to graduate but requested that the student not share this decision with others. Although Kate felt uneasy about the lack of transparency and breaching the rules, her WIL practitioners may consider an international student's personal circumstances or objectives when accepting the student into the co-op program (Steve, Alice). International students may have a different education agenda to domestic students. Denying international students a co-op experience may jeopardize their employment prospects on graduation, thereby reducing their chances of obtaining a post-graduate work permit and permanent residency. Students have requested Steve's approval to complete a work-term that does not meet the learning outcomes of the co-op. However, the employer is willing to sponsor the student for permanent residency. Care and integrity were two ethical characteristics when Steve reflected on this ethical risk:

What's our role? ... Is it to maintain the integrity of the co-op program? Is it to graduate students? Or is it for them, personally, to reach their goal in life of becoming a Canadian citizen? That's muddy. I don't know.

Steve's current practice involves being flexible with the learning outcomes to meet the student's goal of permanent residency in Canada, despite the inherent conflict with integrity.

The WIL practitioner may not disclose a student, HEI or employer issue to another stakeholder. A HEI may have issues with an employer which are not disclosed to the student. Transparency and integrity underpin this ethical risk. For instance, students have approached David with a prospective employer that is not appropriate for co-op, based on information that David is privy to. Disclosure of this information may undermine the employer's reputation, but failure to disclose may nevertheless generate suspicion by the student about the employer and the HEI, and thereby undermine the reputation of both stakeholders. Conversely, an employer may advise the WIL practitioner about student misconduct, but request that the WIL practitioner not disclose the issue to the student. In this scenario, Alice was conflicted between the employers' interests, that is not breaking the employer's trust (integrity), and student interests in providing them with the appropriate support and feedback to succeed on co-op (care). An employer may also request, during the student's work-term, additional information from the student (e.g., health) on suspicion that the student has a history of poor performance on co-op (Alice), or the employer has performance or behavioral concerns during co-op (Chris). Alice and Chris do not disclose this information on legal (privacy, confidentiality) and ethical grounds (care, integrity).

The student may have a workplace or supervisor issue, such as sexual harassment or workplace bullying, and ask the WIL practitioner not to address it with the employer (Chris, Lisa, Alice). For instance, Lisa had a student who experienced alleged racial and sexual harassment by a group of male colleagues but did not provide permission for Lisa to contact the employer because the student wanted to graduate on time. Lisa acknowledged that the employer was denied the opportunity of explaining

its side of the story (equity). Whilst Lisa provided the option of securing another position for the student and directed the student to support services on campus, the student nevertheless remained exposed to a hazardous work environment. Chris encouraged a student, who made a complaint of workplace bullying, to approach their supervisor or utilize the dispute resolution procedures of the employer. The student elected not to do so, or for Chris to investigate further during the work-term, as they feared retribution from the employer. Without an investigation, Chris could not determine whether the issue was workplace bullying.

Student Conduct

Student conduct prior to the work-term creates ethical risks. For example, students may choose not to disclose a disability or medical condition to the employer and/or the HEI. Consequently, the HEI and the employer cannot arrange accommodations for the student to improve their prospects of success during the co-op (Steve, Sarah, Greg), and the employer does not have a realistic picture of the student that they have engaged (Steve). A student may also revoke, or attempt to revoke, the acceptance of an employment offer. This conduct may negatively impact the employer – HEI relationship and place future co-op opportunities at risk. For instance, one of Clare’s students accepted an offer from one employer with whom the HEI had a good relationship with, and then attempted to decline this position after accepting an offer from a second employer. The student’s actions were unethical, and breached the co-op agreement, which prohibits students from competing for co-op opportunities after accepting an employment offer. The employer wasted time and resources in onboarding the student, and other students were potentially denied a co-op opportunity. With limited exceptions, Chris’ experience is that students who engage in this conduct are terminated from the co-op program. Students may also engage in unethical conduct with existing employers by expressing interest in, but not committing to, a second work-term with the employer, while continuing to search for other co-op opportunities. John describes this conduct as “keeping the employer on the hook”. The employer behaves ethically by awaiting the student’s response to a second work-term, which denies them the ability to secure a potential replacement.

Students that secure an employer for their work-term (self-directed co-op), or involve their parents during the co-op program, pose ethical risks relating to care, transparency and integrity. Students have falsely claimed that they completed a self-directed co-op, using a mock employer e-mail address to communicate with the HEI (Lisa), whereas the employer sourced by David’s student was not suitable based on information David possessed about the employer. In entrepreneur programs, the student is self-employed and therefore the co-op is self-directed. Sarah’s challenge with entrepreneur programs was to articulate an appropriate working environment, and student obligations around work hours, final output, and maintaining regular contact with a mentor. Sarah was concerned about whether the student would possess the ethics to adhere to these standards, in the absence of traditional employer supervision. Sarah has also struggled with parental involvement in co-op programs. A parent or relative as a work supervisor may not provide an appropriate level of support to achieve the learning outcomes of the work-term. Steve was concerned with a growing trend of students inviting their parents to meetings. According to Steve, parental involvement may inhibit transparency: “... it makes it really difficult to have an honest and open conversation with your student when mom and dad are sitting right there staring at you”.

Employer Conduct

Employers may engage in unethical conduct prior to the work-term, such as revoking an offer of employment (Chris, John). In accepting the offer of employment now dissolved, the student is at a disadvantage because they are prevented from applying for other co-op opportunities (equity). Chris and John acknowledged that the employer may have good financial reasons for doing so, and Chris will not consider any action against the employer in these circumstances. For employers without a valid reason, WIL practitioners are likely to suspend or terminate the employer's involvement in the co-op program. The ethical issue was integrity – the employer not taking responsibility for their actions (John) and that “your word should mean something” (Chris). Employers have also requested that WIL practitioners select students for their consideration. Both Chris and Alice described this request as a “slippery slope”, which they reject on the grounds of equity and integrity. First, the student has the right to determine which co-op opportunities to apply for, and the employer has the responsibility for student recruitment. Second, what if the WIL practitioner makes the wrong selection, leaving the employer or student dissatisfied with their co-op experience? As Chris puts it, “your program becomes culpable for decisions that you’re making on the students’ behalf that they’ve [employer] asked you to make for them”. Nevertheless, some employers have been frustrated with Alice’s refusal to “send only the good students” and claimed that other institutions screen students for them.

The employer may expose the student to a poor work or learning environment due to inadequate supervision of the student (Chris, Lisa), misrepresentation of the work agreed to by the student (John), employee misconduct such as workplace bullying (Chris, Clare), sexual harassment and other forms of inappropriate sexual behavior (Chris, Lisa), and students working overtime without compensation (Lisa). Chris and John argued that some employers do not abide by a fundamental principle of co-op - that the employer is a co-educator with the HEI. Poor supervision is at odds with a work environment in which students “feel fostered to learn, to make mistakes, to be a student” (Lisa). The employer is not an appropriate co-educator if the student’s work on co-op does not correspond with the job description the student had originally agreed to. In John’s case, the work was not relevant to the student’s discipline, meaning the student was not receiving the type of experience required by the co-op program. The employer saw nothing wrong with their conduct, because they were still paying the student: “To me, they weren’t true partners in co-operative education because their idea was ‘well, we’re still paying them’”. An employer that does not afford procedural fairness to the student during a disciplinary process also neglects their learning obligations. For instance, an employer may terminate the student’s employment without any feedback as to the reasons for their termination, or without giving the student an opportunity to demonstrate improvement in their behavior or performance (Chris).

DISCUSSION

The five characteristics of ethics, as constructed by WIL practitioners, provided context to the ethical risks they experience in WIL programs. Their experiences have expanded the instances of unethical stakeholder behavior identified in the literature. Four themes about ethical risks emerged from the case study and will be discussed in the sections which follow: making exceptions to rules; disclosure of stakeholder issues; negotiating competing stakeholder interests; and co-operative education versus employment.

Making Exceptions

WIL practitioners may make exceptions to co-op rules, justifying their conduct as serving the interests of students and/or employers, and despite their ethical concerns about student equity, integrity and transparency. Making exceptions is an example of non-compliance with policy (McFarlane, Ricks & Field, 1999). In fact, WIL practitioners may create their own rules when granting an exception to co-op eligibility requirements (e.g., GPA, pre-requisite study, maximum work-terms). WIL practitioners take an exception-based approach to rules which are designed to protect stakeholder interests because they want to facilitate, and not obstruct, co-op opportunities for employers and students. Therein lies the ethical conflict, which is compounded if, as in the case of Kate, the student is asked not to disclose the exception made by the WIL practitioner to their peers. Overall, the conduct of WIL practitioners raises an important question for HEI management: should the existing rules be re-examined if WIL practitioners are creating exceptions to, or breaching, the rules? The rules themselves maybe a source of ethical risk that WIL practitioners manage by creating exceptions. In fact, one or more exceptions could be incorporated as HEI rules to promote transparency and consistency in decision-making.

Stakeholder Interests and Disclosure of Issues

Many of the ethical risks associated with the conduct of WIL practitioners are a product of conflicting interests between student groups or between students and employers (as represented by a 'v' in Appendix A). WIL practitioners encounter an ethical conflict when stakeholders prohibit the WIL practitioner from disclosing issues about performance or behavior they have about another stakeholder. A performance or behavioral issue may impact the co-op program, yet the WIL practitioner maintains the confidentiality of one stakeholder at the expense of transparency to another stakeholder. For instance, Chris investigated student allegations of workplace bullying after the student work-term ended. Chris was not permitted by the student to disclose the student's concerns during the work-term. To the work supervisor's dismay, they were causing "unintended friction" and grief that could have been resolved during the work-term. The ethical conflict for Chris was between care and transparency, with non-disclosure potentially undermining the HEI's relationship with the employer (a reputation risk). The non-disclosure of student disability or medical conditions raises ethical risks, as well as legal risks relating to student rights to privacy, student competency, and workplace health and safety (Cameron et al., 2018). From an ethics perspective, the lack of transparency by students means that the HEI and employer cannot support the student with reasonable accommodations in the workplace. Overall, HEI management should consider methods to encourage disclosure by stakeholders, including education and rules (e.g., policy or contract), in order to minimize the ethical risks.

Co-Operative Education v Employment

There are two contracts operating in co-operative education programs: the employment contract, and a learning contract involving the HEI, employer and student. The learning contract may not be in writing, or legally binding, but it imposes an ethical obligation on the employer to provide a learning environment for students as a co-educator with the HEI. The employer's responsibility to facilitate student learning (the learning contract), is what distinguishes co-operative education from employment. It is clear from the study that some employers do not appreciate, or comply with, their obligations under the learning contract, thereby creating ethical risks. An example is the employer that saw nothing wrong with misrepresenting the work originally agreed to by the student because the student was still being paid (John). Employers also breach the learning contract by: not creating a

supportive learning environment for the student in the workplace, exposing the student to workplace hazards, terminating the student's work-term without affording the student a learning opportunity to improve their behavior or performance, and encouraging the student to accept full time employment during their work-term at the expense of further education (see also Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada, 2018b). Given WIL practitioners' concerns, HEI management should evaluate the resources used to educate employers about and manage their learning obligations on co-op. This may include an employer handbook, acknowledgement letter, or a formal learning contract which outlines the education obligations of all stakeholders before, during and after the work-term.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study reported in this article is the first known systematic assessment of ethical risks from the sole perspective of WIL practitioners. There were, however, two research limitations - the sample and the subjectivity of the research topic. Readers may determine, in a similar manner to Ricks (2003), that participant responses were not ethical risks but practice issues. Whether ethical or not, the risks did impact the operation of the WIL program, and caused practitioner concern. It is argued that these operational risks still need to be managed by HEIs because of their potential financial, reputation, and legal consequences. The sample in the study was restricted to ethical risks in co-op programs, involving paid employment, in Canada. Future research will explore how the Canadian practitioners managed the ethical risks through education and training, institutional support, relationship management, stakeholder collaboration, and self-regulation. The case study methodology can also be applied by WIL researchers to other countries, other forms of WIL and other disciplines (e.g., Education), with the results compared to the present study.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the case study findings can be applied to evaluate existing risk management frameworks, and to educate WIL stakeholders about ethical risks in WIL programs. The five characteristics of ethics and the ethical risks described by WIL practitioners may be used to develop principles or codes of conduct which guide ethical decision-making by WIL practitioners (e.g., Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada, 2018b). Parts of the case study may also be used by stakeholders as a resource to develop their ethical awareness of the risks that they, and other stakeholders, may encounter during WIL programs. From a HEI management perspective, a key issue is whether existing practices effectively manage the ethical risks identified by WIL practitioners. Ethical risks not previously considered by HEIs may result in changes to risk management frameworks. More broadly, the research may generate greater awareness within HEIs of the complex ethical issues confronting WIL practitioners. The job of the WIL practitioner is not simply to place students with host organizations but requires the WIL practitioner to manage a range of ethical risks with attendant legal, reputation and financial consequences for the HEI.

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APPENDIX A: Ethical risks in co-op programs

Ethical risk	Ethical characteristics
WIL practitioner conduct	
A student is accepted into the co-op program or approved to continue a work-term in breach of, or as an exception to, HEI rules	Care v Rules; Care v Equity; Equity; Equity v Rules; Rules; Transparency;
The WIL practitioner feels pressured to place a student on a work-term	Care; Integrity
A student with a history of poor performance or misconduct during previous work-terms is granted or denied access to another work-term	Care v Integrity
The WIL practitioner considers an international student's personal circumstances or objectives when accepting the student into the co-op program	Equity; Care v Integrity; Care v Rules
The WIL practitioner does not disclose a HEI, student or employer issue to another stakeholder	Care v Care; Care v Integrity; Care v Transparency; Equity; Integrity v Transparency; Transparency
The WIL practitioner provides different levels of engagement among students during the work-term (e.g. students with a disability or medical condition, students on regional or remote work-terms versus local work-terms)	Care v Equity; Care v Integrity
Student conduct	
A student terminates a work-term and commences full time work with the same employer	Integrity; Rules
A student does not disclose their academic issues to the WIL practitioner	Transparency
A student does not disclose their disability or medical condition to the HEI, WIL practitioner and/or employer	Care; Transparency; Rules v Transparency
A student identifies an employer for their work-term which was not sourced by the HEI (self-directed co-op)	Care; Integrity
A student involves their parents, or other close relatives, during the co-op program	Care; Transparency
A student revokes, or attempts to revoke, the acceptance of an employment offer	Care; Equity; Integrity; Rules; Transparency

Ethical risk	Ethical characteristics
A student engages in plagiarism (e.g. presenting the same resume, producing a report at the end of the work-term which is not their own work)	Integrity; Rules
A student misuses employer property (e.g., accessing sexually explicit content, using commercially sensitive information for the students' own business)	Integrity; Rules
A student misuses HEI property (e.g., hacking into the HEI IT system and impersonating the co-op office in e-mails to students)	Integrity; Rules
A student does not commit to an existing employer whilst searching for alternative employers	Integrity; Transparency
A student misrepresents their experience or qualifications on resumes	Integrity
A student makes false representations about their experience during co-op (e.g., falsifying timesheets or claiming to have completed a work-term that did not exist)	Integrity; Rules
Employer conduct	
The employer encourages the student during their work-term to commence full time work with the employer	Integrity; Care, Rules
The employer requests that the HEI selects students for their consideration	Equity; Integrity
The employer exposes the student to a poor workplace or learning environment (bullying; harassment; poor supervision)	Care; Integrity
The employer does not take responsibility for providing reasonable accommodations for students with a disability or medical condition	Equity
The employer withdraws an offer of employment to the student	Care; Equity; Integrity