



**Higher  
Education**  
STRATEGY ASSOCIATES

# 2024 Annual Report:

Evaluation of the Calgary  
WIL Pilot Project

**Prepared for the Calgary Work Integrated  
Learning Secretariate**

January 2025



**MONITORING  
AND  
EVALUATION**



# Higher Education

STRATEGY ASSOCIATES

Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) is a Toronto-based firm providing strategic insight and guidance to governments, postsecondary institutions, and agencies through excellence and expertise in policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and strategic consulting services. Through these activities, HESA strives to improve the quality, efficacy, and fairness of higher education systems in Canada and worldwide.

**Authors:** Janelle Curry and Tiffany MacLennan.

**Work completed on behalf of:** the Calgary Work Integrated Learning Secretariate

**Design notes:** The shape of the footer is an outline of the Rocky Mountains. The pattern within this shape is a stylized representation of the Calgary road network. Combined, this illustration represents Alberta as a whole while also highlighting TalentED YYC's specific connection to Calgary.

Any errors or omissions are the authors' alone.

**Contact:**

Higher Education Strategy Associates  
Suite 207, 20 Maud Street  
Toronto ON  
M5V 2M5, Canada

[info@higheredstrategy.com](mailto:info@higheredstrategy.com)

[www.higheredstrategy.com](http://www.higheredstrategy.com)

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# Executive Summary

## Key Learnings from the Pilot Project

### **Pooling resources is an innovative approach complementary to individualized funding**

TalentED YYC presented an innovative approach to growing the WIL ecosystem by managing pooled resources to create a greater regional impact, rather than duplicating an individualized funding model for PSIs. While some stakeholders wondered if direct funding might have been more effective, the project demonstrated the benefits of collaboration. TalentED YYC engaged with feedback, fostered relationships, and helped strengthen the WIL ecosystem, showcasing the value of shared resource management in expanding opportunities for students and employers alike.

### **Technology alone will not fix a shortage in WIL opportunities**

The pilot project initially envisioned its portal as a central hub for WIL opportunities, but technical limitations and data-sharing restrictions hindered its effectiveness. These challenges required manual workarounds by the Secretariate, highlighting that technology alone cannot resolve WIL shortages. Future initiatives should carefully assess platform capabilities and consider alternative or supplementary technology solutions to enhance collaboration.

### **Collaboration with and between PSIs takes time and capacity**

Collaboration between PSIs and non-PSI entities like TalentED YYC requires time and effort due to institutional differences and competitive dynamics. Despite initial challenges, the Secretariate successfully brought WIL practitioners together through consistent communication, fostering valuable discussions and shared learning. While early resource constraints

posed difficulties, TalentED YYC's commitment to understanding PSI processes has strengthened collaboration.

### **SMEs benefit from a bridging entity between themselves and PSIs**

TalentED YYC has successfully acted as a bridge between SMEs and PSIs, making WIL more accessible for smaller employers. By simplifying the process through outreach, marketing, and partnerships, the pilot project enabled SMEs to engage in WIL despite limited HR capacity. Future efforts should explore ways to streamline support further, ensuring long-term sustainability and scalability.

### **Projects provide an accessible pathway into WIL**

TalentED YYC has played a key role in expanding employer-sponsored WIL projects, making work-integrated learning more accessible, especially for SMEs. Capstone projects offer a flexible, low-risk way for employers to engage with students while faculty provide academic guidance. By facilitating these projects, TalentED YYC has increased WIL opportunities and strengthened connections between students, employers, and institutions in Calgary.

### **WIL complexities are reflected in funder metrics**

The pilot project successfully navigated the complexities of aligning funder metrics with the diverse landscape of WIL. Despite varying priorities among funders, TalentED YYC adapted its KPI tracking to meet evolving needs, demonstrating flexibility and commitment to accurate data collection. This experience highlights the opportunity for funders and stakeholders to refine WIL metrics for clearer communication and greater impact.





# Project and Evaluation Overview

## TalentED YYC / The Calgary WIL Pilot Project

TalentED YYC launched as the Calgary WIL Pilot Project in April 2023 and will run through March 2025. The project is operated by the Calgary WIL Secretariate out of Calgary Economic Development (CED), one of the project's founding partners and ongoing champion.

The pilot project takes an innovative approach to develop a work-integrated learning (WIL) model that bridges the gaps between the participating postsecondary institutions (PSIs), community members, and employers. The objectives of this pilot project are to formulate a model structure, enable partnerships among the stakeholders, and support the WIL community capacity in Calgary. The goal is to establish a labour market pathway through the facilitation of WIL partnerships with local postsecondary institutions, community members, and business owners.

From these objectives, the public-facing brand of TalentED YYC was born. Through its resources, support services, and online portal, TalentED YYC simplifies the process for employers looking to hire a student. They assist with scoping the work, connecting the employer with funding providers, and posting roles across the job boards of all seven<sup>1</sup> post-secondary institutions in Calgary.

TalentED YYC is supported by the following partners and funders.

### THE PARTNERS



### THE FUNDERS



## Project need and opportunity

The Calgary WIL Pilot Project was conceived in 2021 by the provosts of Calgary’s PSIs in response to the Government of Alberta’s (GoA) Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs Strategy, which mandates that all postsecondary students in the province have access to WIL opportunities by 2030. The pilot was created to facilitate collaboration between PSIs, employers, and governments so that together they could develop more and more diversified WIL opportunities to meet this mandate. The project officially launched in Spring 2023 with two main components. One, a Secretariate who would act as liaison and convener of the project partners and provide outreach and support to employers. Two, a portal for employers through which they could, in theory, easily send WIL opportunities across the seven partnered PSIs, with little additional effort needed on the PSI side to distribute the opportunities to students. Together, these components were designed to provide a “one-stop-shop” for WIL in Calgary.

Alberta 2030 aims to close the skills gap between education and industry needs by increasing WIL, thereby increasing job readiness in postsecondary graduates. However, the WIL mandate and its timeline makes no distinction between PSIs that had a long history of comprehensive WIL programming (i.e., SAIT) and those that had no or few formal WIL components in any of their programs (i.e., AUArts). Because Alberta’s performance-based funding model for PSIs links funding to WIL participation, there has been an urgency amongst many PSIs to build and expand their WIL offerings by 2030, lest their funding be penalized.

With limited capacity and resources, PSIs have been focused on developing WIL programs or maintaining their existing programs, in most cases with few resources to put toward engaging new employers, which is necessary to meet the WIL needs set by the province. This strained capacity is what prompted the creation of TalentED YYC and its Secretariate to bridge the gap between the student talent in PSIs and the labour needs of employers, and to ultimately establish a scalable WIL ecosystem in Calgary.

Shortly into the pilot project’s runway, TalentED YYC also secured funding from the Business and Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) to explore innovative WIL (iWIL) activities—like capstone projects, design competitions, boot camps, and simulated WIL—as preparatory experiences for more formal WIL placements. PSIs were especially interested in exploring capstone projects as a WIL type; however, projects are in a grey area under GoA’s current definitions of WIL. Although GoA and PrairiesCan allowed projects to be included as part of TalentED YYC’s KPIs, BHER’s funding allowed TalentED YYC to test and showcase the effectiveness of projects and other iWIL activities in providing quality learning and professionalization opportunities to students.

TalentED YYC operates within a complex ecosystem, involving multiple stakeholders working to improve WIL opportunities. The project’s theory of change envisioned a regional platform that integrates resources and decision-making to address WIL gaps. As the pilot progressed, the initiative has been focused on testing its scalability, sustainability, and effectiveness, while addressing challenges like varying PSI resources, employer engagement, and technical limitations of the portal. Insights from the pilot will inform future WIL initiatives in Calgary and beyond.



## The Secretariate

TalentED YYC is operated by a Secretariate working out of CED and which is composed of an executive director and five sub-teams with distinct responsibilities, including cross-team support and collaboration. Below is the broad purpose of each Secretariate team. Comprehensive organizational charts are available in Appendix A.

**Executive Director (ED)<sup>2</sup>:** Oversees the work of the three branches/four sub-teams, and acts as the main representative of TalentED YYC.

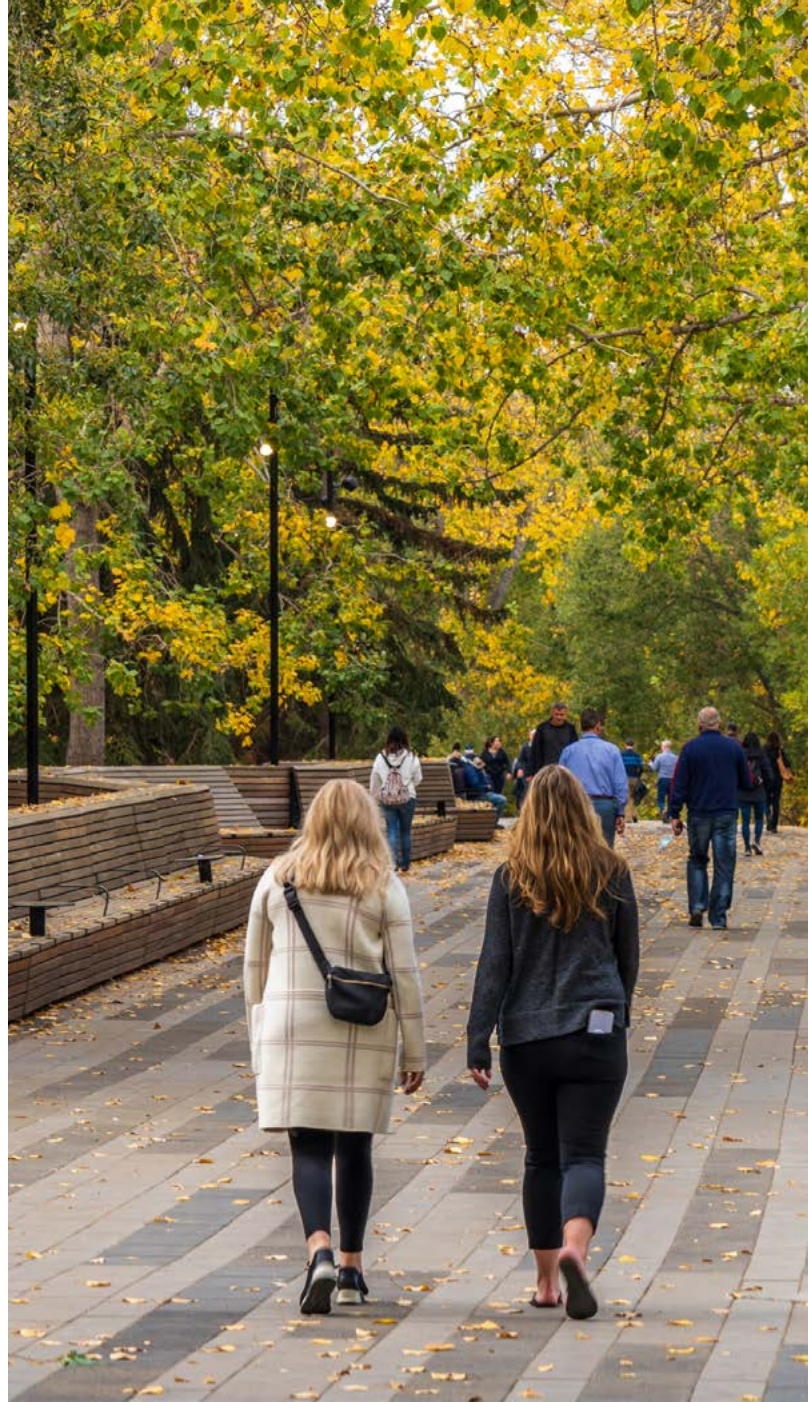
**Strategy and Evaluation Team (SET):** Collects and distributes project updates and KPIs to stakeholders and funders through collaboration between its sub-teams. Conducts strategic planning for the future of the project. The SET consists of the TDST and the CPDT.

**Technology & Data Systems Team (TDST):** Operating under the SET, the TDST evaluates, configures, and/or implements the various technology platforms used by TalentED YYC and reviews and recommends process enhancements.

**Community & Practice Development Team (CPDT):** Operating under the SET, the CPDT acts as primary contact for PSI WIL practitioners and develops and gathers resources relevant to employers, PSI WIL practitioners, and students.

**Employer Engagement Team (EET):** Acts as primary contact for employers, providing tailored 1:1 service from scoping out WIL opportunities to helping employers navigate PSI WIL requirements.

**Marketing & Communications Team (MCT):** Supports the public-facing brand of TalentED YYC.



## The Evaluation

This report is the last of a multi-year and multi-deliverable evaluation to assess the TalentED YYC pilot, conducted by Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) on behalf of the Calgary WIL Secretariate. The Secretariate was required to generate evidence to ensure accountability and learning of the project, while HESA provided evaluation design and method expertise to the Secretariate.

The focus of this evaluation is the TalentED YYC team and its role in facilitating partnerships among participating stakeholders. HESA was responsible for developing an evaluation framework that was both formative and summative in nature to guide this process throughout the project. HESA's evaluation framework includes evaluation questions, data collection methods, analysis strategies, a data management plan, and deliverables.

### Evaluation methodology

Much of HESA's work with TalentED YYC has focused on providing insights that reflect the complexity of the project's goals, drawing from the pilot project and from WIL programs elsewhere.

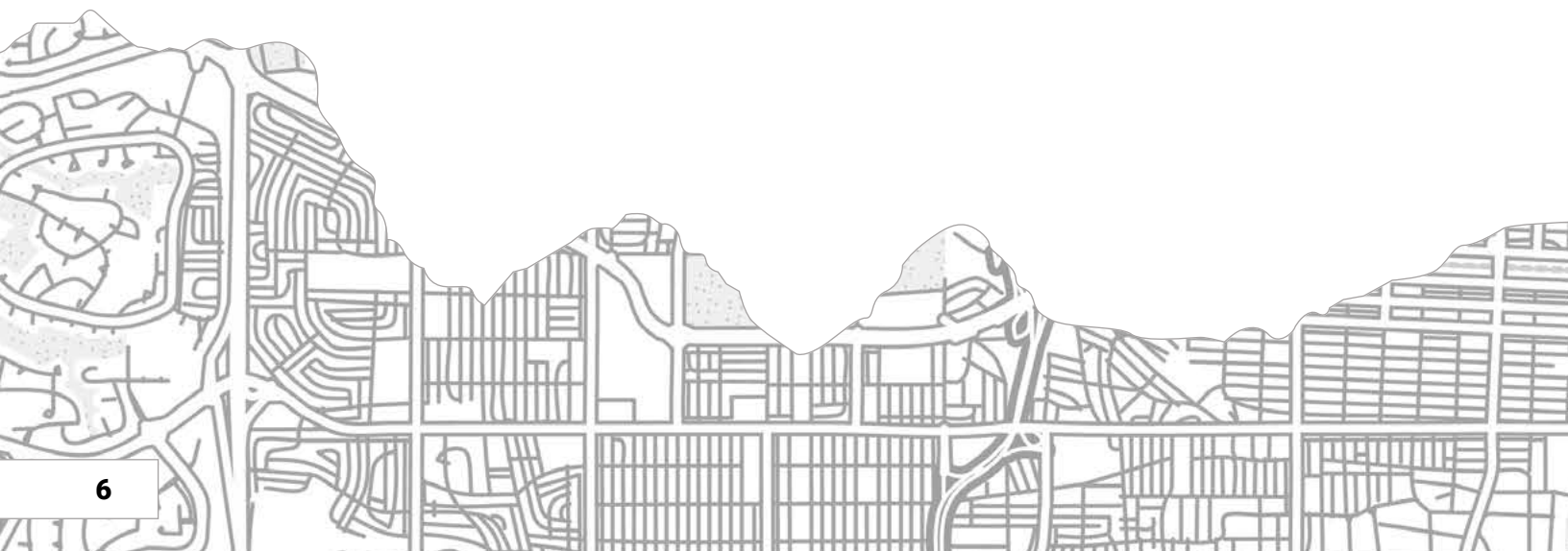
HESA designed ten questions to directly and indirectly frame its evaluation activities:

1. What activities is TalentED YYC undertaking to reach its aims?
2. What is the current status of the pilot project? What are the intended and unintended challenges?

3. In what ways does the pilot project establish and maintain partnerships with the stakeholders? What is working well and what is not?
4. What unique value does the pilot project bring to meet each of the partners' needs? What could TalentED YYC still address that would benefit this consortium approach?
5. What are the stakeholders' expectations of this pilot project going forward?
6. What have been the costs and benefits of the WIL pilot project? In what way has the project generated benefits for employers?
7. In what ways does TalentED YYC support the quantity of WIL positions and the quality of the experience? How would participating institutions and employers be impacted with respect to WIL if the pilot project shut down?
8. What are the friction points of this pilot project?
9. How has this pilot project demonstrated the feasibility of a WIL regional approach?
10. What are the true costs and benefits of TalentED YYC?

These evaluation questions were answered using data collected from:

1. Team meetings between HESA and the Secretariate.
2. Monthly project reports compiled by the Secretariate.
3. Data from an employer survey distributed by the Secretariate in summer 2024.
4. The contents of previous deliverables submitted by HESA to the Secretariate.<sup>3</sup>
5. Interviews conducted by HESA with employers, PSI staff, and the Secretariate.<sup>4</sup>



## The 2024 Annual Report

As the last project deliverable, this report takes the shape of a summative evaluation of the pilot with four key purposes:

1. To trace the project's progress and changes over the past year.
2. To gather the lessons learned over the course of the project.
3. To assess whether and how the TalentED YYC pilot has met its objectives.
4. To determine the value in continuing TalentED YYC past the pilot phase.

In the months leading up to this report, TalentED YYC pursued funding opportunities for a phase two of the project which would expand its scope outside of Calgary to other areas in Alberta. HESA participated in some of this work, including producing a Sustainability and Scalability report in June 2024 that combined stakeholder feedback from multiple sources as well as research into the operational structures and missions of comparable initiatives and associations, such as FutureNB and BHER. This report was written before the funding decisions for a second project phase were announced. Its focus is on the pilot's successes and lessons regardless of funding renewal.

## Limitations of the evaluation

TalentED YYC has faced challenges to producing quantitative data to track the project's impact throughout the course of this pilot. The primary cause for this was the data collection and data sharing limitations of TalentED YYC's primary technology platform, the Orbis/Magnet portal (i.e., Campus Connect). Other factors also played a part, like the well-known challenges in categorizing WIL types, placements, and outcomes and issues preventing the timely signing of MOUs between TalentED YYC and the PSIs, which would have allowed the portal to send select placement data to TalentED.

These quantitative data challenges impeded HESA's ability to confidently estimate the project's economic impact so another entity is conducting this assessment for the pilot project instead.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, stakeholders were generous with their time and participation throughout the evaluation, which provided HESA with rich qualitative data that speaks to the impact and importance of TalentED YYC's relationship building to work-integrated learning. HESA adapted its evaluation methods to work with the data available and when applicable indicates the limitations and nuances of certain metrics.

HESA also wishes to note that relatively few employers agreed to participate in the second round of interviews that took place over November 2024. TalentED's frequent employer engagement in their phase two visioning exercises from May through August 2024 likely contributed to consultation fatigue and employers' disinterest in participating in our final round of evaluation interviews. Employer over-consultation was a concern raised by the TalentED team prior to interview requests being sent, and mitigation efforts were made by TalentED and HESA to minimize the effect of the over-consultation on this evaluation. The employer feedback section has been bolstered by the data from TalentED's July 2024 Employer Survey.

# TalentED YYC: 2024 activities

## Event and activity highlights

### Events

From January 2024 to December 2024, the TalentED YYC has hosted or co-hosted 29 events (including employer workshops) and attended 65, either as opportunities for employer engagement or for networking and professional development in service to the project. Highlights of TalentED YYC's hosted events include the Calgary Talent & Funding Fair, Innovate Inclusion, and AB 2050 Student Case Competition.

### WIL Catalogue

The CPDT has been working closely with PSIs to gather and collate the WIL offerings across these institutions into a WIL catalogue. The catalogue allows PSI staff and employers to see what WIL programs are on offer across the partnered PSIs and is the first of its kind in the city. The WIL catalogue currently has 435 entries/WIL offerings as a result of the data collected from the seven partner PSIs in Calgary.

### Employer Workshops

In partnership with The Nonprofit Chamber, CPHR Alberta, ECO Canada, and the ATB Entrepreneurship Centre, TalentED YYC offered 17 free workshops to help employers scope student roles, understand work integrated learning options, leverage funding, and onboard students.

### Conversations on Calgary WIL

The CPDT continues to support collaboration and networking through its Community of Practice (CoP) and the CoP's Conversations on Calgary WIL sessions. Four sessions were hosted over the year, including a session that was focused on future planning and was facilitated by HESA. These sessions provide a space for feedback and discussion between the PSI WIL practitioners and the CPDT, as well as a space to celebrate achievements and milestones of the PSI partners. Seven sessions have been hosted over the course of the project, one at each partner PSI.

### Conferences

TalentED YYC presented at seven conferences over the year: CCVO Connections Conference, 8th Annual Marketing & Communications for Post-secondary Conference, ACE WIL Conference, CEWIL Conference (TalentED YYC was also a sponsor), EWO Conference, CPHR Conference, and EDA (Economic Developers Alberta) Xperience Leaders' Summit & Conference.

## Marketing WIL

In 2024, the MCT increased employer engagement with TalentED YYC and its brand recognition through its several media outputs: 353 LinkedIn posts, 25 blog posts, and 23 video testimonials from employers, students, and PSI representatives. The MCT's advertisements reached three million impressions over the year, with eight million total throughout the project. The MCT also plays a key part in event hosting and attendance, and supported the roll out of the WIL Catalogue and other digital resources, such as the WIL Decision Tree and the WIL Funding Quiz, both designed to assist employers interested in WIL.

## Employer Advisory Committee

The EET achieved its goal of setting up an employer advisory group to function similarly but separately to the CPDT's CoP. The TalentED Employer Advisory Committee (TEAC) launched in August and has held three meetings over 2024, with a fourth meeting planned for February 2025 as the last in the pilot phase. The TEAC is currently predominantly made-up of small business owners across various sectors. The committee has been exceptionally helpful to the EET by communicating what is most and least useful to small businesses.

## Community of Practice

The CoP now has four sub-committees dedicated to key topics in WIL: the Resources and Education Committee, the Promotion & Marketing Committee, the Orbis Committee, and the WIL Community and Workshop Planning Committee.

## Collaborations

In addition to its formal partnerships, TalentED YYC has been meeting regularly with AB WIL to discuss collaboration, support, and reducing duplication of efforts between the organizations. In February 2024, TalentED YYC collaborated with CEWIL and AB WIL to host two provincial/regional WIL webinar series, one with Experiential and Work-Integrated Learning Ontario (EWO) and another with the Association for Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning BC (ACE-WIL).

## Technology

As of April 2024, the new Technology and Data Systems Team is now responsible for the portal and other technologies used by TalentED YYC. The team also reviews internal processes and implements enhancements to them.

## PSI Agreements

The pilot's Campus Connect portal was originally expected to launch in all seven partnered PSIs, but the limitations of the portal's use and compatibility with PSIs' technology systems posed challenges in reaching this goal throughout 2023. Four PSIs were using the portal and three were entering the testing stages of the portal. By the end of 2024, two of the PSIs had not yet launched the portal post-testing and one PSI ceased pursuing the portal's adoption. Sourced from discussions with PSI staff and the Secretariate, there are several reasons—often intersecting—that three PSIs never launched the portal:

- The portal's incompatibility with existing software at the PSI.
- The incompatibility of the portal's functions with where the PSI was at with their WIL development.
- The demands on the PSI staff's time to work with the technology partners to adapt the portal to their PSI's systems.
- The prohibitive cost of the portal once the pilot project was over.
- The discouraging testimonials from some of the four PSIs who did launch the portal but encountered consistent bugs disrupting the user experience.

As the past two years have demonstrated, the value of the TalentED YYC pilot project quickly surpassed the value of the portal alone. While the portal did not fulfill the expectations of TalentED YYC providing a

one-stop-shop for WIL in Calgary, the work of the project team nonetheless supported all seven PSIs in their development of WIL within their institutions and hundreds of employers in their uptake of WIL across all seven institutions.

The other main challenge in collaborating with PSIs throughout the project was in the process of developing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) which would facilitate data sharing between PSIs and TalentED YYC so that the latter could track their progress toward their goals. Originally, the plan was to have one MOU amongst all the partnered PSIs, but after a year of discussion between TalentED and the PSIs, it was clear that the variations in PSIs would not lead to consensus about the content of a singular MOU. Instead, a charter was developed with and for the Executive Advisory Group (EAG) to provide a basis of understanding among the senior leaders of the group and individual MOUs were drafted for each PSI.

The turnover of senior leaders at the partnered PSIs—common across the level and sector—caused significant delays in signing the EAG charter and the MOUs. As language would be agreed upon, turnover would bring in new voices with questions that may have been previously attended to but needed to be re-opened to ensure everyone felt comfortable and on board with the charter. Unfortunately, consensus was not reached here either. Six out of nine partner organizations signed the charter,<sup>6</sup> though those who did not sign still participate in the project. Five of the nine partners signed MOUs.<sup>7</sup>



# Metrics

## PILOT OBJECTIVES AND METRICS

### Funder KPIs

Each of the project’s funders has a set of objectives and associated metrics for the pilot, giving TalentED YYC over a dozen KPIs to track. The pilot exceeded nearly every KPI goal from the funders, more than doubling the goal for several KPIs. The only KPIs whose goals are not yet reached were regarding employer engagement and jobs created. The team has reached 83% of the GoA’s SME’s assisted goal and still has three months left of the pilot project, during which time they could feasibly reach closer to this target. The number of jobs created—a PrairiesCan KPI—was a difficult metric for TalentED YYC to track, so the number shared for that KPI is an extrapolation from an economic impact assessment of the pilot project.

Key Performance Indicators – Government of Alberta	2024	Project Total	Funder Target	Percent of Target reached
WIL placements <i>The number of filled traditional WIL opportunities posted on the portal plus the number of completed iWIL projects.</i>	1527	1699	1000	170%
SMEs assisted <i>The number of small to medium-sized businesses and non-profit organizations directly assisted in the development of traditional WIL, who hosted iWIL opportunities, and who attended TalentED YYC’s employer workshops.</i>	589	743	900	83%
Economic impact assessment <i>The estimated value (in CDN\$) that the pilot project added to Alberta’s GDP through its work accelerating and scaling development of highly qualified personnel through growing WIL.</i>	/	\$7.2 to \$14.4 million	N/A <sup>8</sup>	N/A

Key Performance Indicators – PrairiesCan	2024	Project Total	Funder Target	Percent of Target reached
High Quality Professionals Trained <i>The number of filled traditional WIL opportunities posted on the portal plus the number of completed iWIL (all types).</i>	1901	2167	1000	217%
High Quality Professional Jobs Created	/	115 <sup>9</sup>	500	23%
SMEs assisted <i>The number of small to medium-sized businesses and non-profit organizations directly assisted in the development of traditional WIL, who hosted iWIL opportunities, and who attended TalentED YYC’s employer workshops.</i>	589	743	250	297%
Economic impact assessment <i>The estimated value (in CDN\$) that the pilot project added to Alberta’s GDP through its work accelerating and scaling development of highly qualified personnel through growing WIL.</i>	/	\$7.2 to \$14.4 million	\$10 million	72% to 144%

In addition to BHER’s KPIs presented in the table, TalentED YYC collected pre-opportunity and post-opportunity surveys from students to assess their experience participating in iWIL. From over 650 responses:

- 91% of student respondents were somewhat or very satisfied with their iWIL opportunity.
- 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participating in the iWIL opportunity helped them be better prepared for the workforce.
- 83% of respondents felt the iWIL opportunity helped them to better articulate their skills.
- Over 80% of respondents felt they improved their problem solving and critical thinking skills somewhat or a lot, as a result of completing their iWIL opportunity.



Key Performance Indicators – Business + Higher Education Roundtable	2024	Project Total	Funder Target	Percent of Target reached
iWILs registered <i>The number of registrations for iWIL opportunities.</i>	1892	2153	N/A	<b>N/A</b>
iWILs completed <i>The number of completed iWIL opportunities.</i>	1766	1966	900	<b>218%</b>
iWILs created for equity-deserving groups <sup>10</sup> <i>The number of students registered for an iWIL opportunity that identified as part of an EDG in the pre-iWIL surveys.</i>	618	724	640	<b>113%</b>
Employers engaged <i>The number of employers who participated in iWIL opportunities as host, mentor, panelist, etc.</i>	199	280	180 <sup>11</sup>	<b>155%</b>
Employers outreach <i>The number of new employer contacts engaged through outreach like email listservs, social media (i.e., LinkedIn), and events, where information is shared about opportunities to participate in the creation of WIL opportunities.</i>	2566	3855	1000	<b>386%</b>

The TalentED YYC team put significant effort into determining how to count the totals for each of these funder KPIs once the data collection and sharing limitations of the portal were exposed. The team also had to continuously discuss each KPI with their funders, whose criteria for KPI measurement would evolve throughout the pilot and need realigning with TalentED YYC’s data tracking and reporting practices. The complexity of the funders’ KPIs and the changing metrics TalentED YYC had to accommodate to meet changing funder expectations caused some communication challenges for the team throughout the project. At times, the impact metrics the team shared with stakeholders could appear inconsistent across the suite of TalentED YYC’s communication materials. In reality, they were accurate for each setting, audience, and time period.<sup>12</sup>

## Qualitative insights

An unfortunate result of the project’s data sharing challenges is that TalentED YYC is unable to track whether the WIL opportunities posted to their portal are net new (i.e., the WIL opportunity did not exist prior to TalentED YYC’s efforts). However, HESA’s qualitative data collection through employer interviews captured three recurring examples of the impact that the portal and the TalentED YYC team’s concerted outreach and support had on the number of WIL opportunities generated.

1. The portal served to diversify the pool of student candidates for a WIL opportunity from those attending one or two PSIs<sup>13</sup> to those attending any of the PSIs participating in the project.
2. TalentED YYC’s efforts also generated additional and diversified WIL opportunities because when some employers came to the EET with a developed WIL opportunity and target PSI in mind, the EET would inform the employer about other kinds of WIL opportunities that could suit their needs and be filled by students in programs from PSIs the employer had not previously considered.
3. Many of the employers from small businesses pointed toward TalentED YYC’s support, including their knowledge sharing about funding opportunities and WIL program types across the city, as directly responsible for their ability to hire a student.





*“I usually just send my WIL opportunities to [one big university]—but the TalentED YYC portal let me send the opportunity to all the PSIs with the same level of effort.”*

— PSI staff interview, November 2024

## Marketing Objectives

TalentED YYC’s Marketing and Communications team had the challenge of developing a marketing strategy for a project and organization with limited comparators because of its innovative approach to growing WIL through direct support for employers. Through its marketing strategies, the MCT greatly contributed to the pilot project’s success at meeting funder KPIs. The MCT developed its own goals in alignment with funder KPIs and the overall project goals, such as:

- Increasing employer understanding and engagement in WIL.
- Increasing brand recognition for TalentED YYC.
- Enhancing community building amongst partners and stakeholders in WIL.

The MCT directly contributed to these goals by hosting and co-hosting events, developing engaging media (e.g., employer video testimonials, blog posts, etc.), managing the project’s presence in traditional and social media, developing ad materials, and more. By tracking engagement alongside each marketing strategy, the MCT was able to react to public perceptions, refining and pivoting their approach as needed.

## Feedback from stakeholders

This section discusses the feedback received by key stakeholders during the second round of interviews conducted in November 2024. HESA conducted 29 interviews with a total of 32 participants, including 13 employers, 7 Secretariate staff, 9 PSI staff, and 3 community partners. Most of the interviewees had also participated in the 2023 interviews, providing an opportunity to reflect on their extended experiences with the pilot project rather than just the initial stages. Feedback is organized by stakeholder groups, highlighting key areas of value-added contributions and challenges, followed by overarching commentary on the future trajectory of the project.

### Post-Secondary Institution (PSI) Staff

PSI staff expressed overwhelming support for the Communities of Practice (CoP) and networking events facilitated by TalentED YYC. These gatherings provided opportunities to connect with regional employers and other WIL practitioners, creating a platform for collaboration that many institutions had long considered valuable but lacked the internal capacity to initiate. TalentED YYC not only enabled these connections but also helped institutions develop a deeper understanding of both the broader needs of students and the specific demands of employers in Calgary. This collaborative spirit allowed institutions to appreciate the collective value of WIL within the region, making the CoP one of the most celebrated aspects of the project.

The support provided by TalentED YYC staff was another widely praised feature of the project. Many participants noted that the right individuals were in place to ensure the project’s success, with staff described as highly responsive and dedicated. For example, when technological issues with the portal arose, staff members went above and beyond, even manually inputting WIL opportunities to PSI boards on

behalf of employers to minimize disruptions. This level of support contributed to a sense of trust and confidence in the TalentED YYC team.

***“Over time, the value proposition [of TalentED YYC] has been demonstrated through CED’s lead in engaging industry, community, etc.—because WIL is not only a PSI matter. This resulted in an increased profile and awareness [of WIL] that could not have been achieved at individual PSIs who are focused on individual needs.”***

— PSI senior leader interview, November 2024

However, challenges were a significant part of the feedback, particularly regarding the WIL portal, which is the project’s main technology infrastructure. Many PSI staff felt that the portal fell short of its intended goals, creating more work instead of streamlining processes. For one institution, the portal was deemed so ineffective that they chose not to use it at all. For others, the portal is not aligned with the kinds of WIL most prevalent at their institution (i.e., industry projects) and so it did not offer the benefits these institutions were expecting given the project’s pitch. Issues such as a steep learning curve, limited functionality, and the absence of basic features like sorting filters were cited as barriers.

***“The project was supposed to lead the technology, but the technology led the project.”***

— PSI staff interview, November 2024

Another prominent challenge was the added workload imposed by the pilot project. While the collaboration facilitated by TalentED YYC was appreciated, some PSI staff felt that their resources and participation were being utilized without adequate benefit in return. For smaller institutions in particular, the time required to engage with the portal, participate in committees, and attend working groups was unsustainable. This imbalance led some participants to question whether the pilot’s demands were worth the effort, especially given the limited tangible outcomes in certain areas, like the volume of WIL opportunities that suited their programs.

Finally, the project’s approach to addressing PSI needs revealed a misalignment with the diverse contexts of participating institutions. TalentED YYC’s attempts to streamline WIL for a broad audience often clashed with the specific priorities of individual PSIs, which are more focused on creating tailored WIL experiences that align with their students’ learning goals. This disconnect between the project’s goals and those of the institutions highlighted the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach, emphasizing the need for greater flexibility and customization moving forward. While 2024 interviews indicate that progress had been made in supporting varying PSI WIL needs since 2023, some PSI staff still ultimately felt that TalentED YYC’s work was not sufficiently aligned with the needs of their institution.



## PSI Staff: Looking Forward

There was general support among stakeholders for a second phase of TalentED YYC, though participants emphasized the need for significant changes in its design and implementation. A central focus of these discussions was the WIL portal, which many felt required a complete reevaluation to better align with institutional needs and expectations. Addressing the portal's functionality and purpose will be critical to ensuring that it does not continue to hinder the project's progress.

Expanding the initiative across the province was seen as both an opportunity and a challenge. Smaller institutions expressed concerns about being overshadowed by larger universities, fearing that their unique needs might be overlooked in a more expansive framework. However, the prospect of including more voices in the Communities of Practice was met with enthusiasm, as it would create richer opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Looking ahead, stakeholders highlighted the importance of reevaluating the project's goals, purpose, and activities to ensure that a second project phase is more tailored to the needs of participating institutions. A redrafted framework that reflects lessons learned and addresses key challenges from the pilot phase will be essential for the project's long-term success.

### Employers and Employer Associations<sup>14</sup>

Employers participating in TalentED YYC shared several areas of value-added benefits while also identifying key challenges that have emerged during their engagement with the initiative. Their feedback

highlights both the strengths of the program and areas for improvement, offering valuable insights into how the project can better serve this stakeholder group in future phases.

One of the most appreciated aspects of TalentED YYC was the support it provided to employers, particularly startups and small organizations hiring students for the first time. These employers often lacked familiarity with the processes required to bring students into their workforce, and TalentED YYC played a vital role in guiding them through these steps. The initiative also functioned as an effective "nudge" system, encouraging employers who expressed interest to follow through with posting jobs. Many employers stated that without these nudges, they might not have completed the process due to time constraints, confusion, or other competing priorities.

*"I'm not sure how far I would have gotten [in the student hiring process] without TalentED YYC—they helped with navigating WIL but as importantly with accountability. I felt like I could get through it, and I did. I made my first hires."*

— SME employer interview, November 2024

Employers also valued the broader outreach that TalentED YYC facilitated. Some participants expressed surprise at the sheer number of post-secondary



institutions in Calgary, noting that they had never considered or managed to post job opportunities to all of them before. TalentED YYC streamlined this process, enabling employers to access a wider pool of student talent than they would have on their own. Employers further cited giving back to students, recruiting new talent, and benefiting from low-wage and/or funding-subsidized support as significant motivators for their participation, which the program enhanced.

Employers also noted the usefulness of TalentED YYC as a source of valuable information. Multiple participants discovered new funding opportunities they were previously unaware of, which they found to be immensely beneficial. Additionally, the program increased employers' understanding of the post-secondary ecosystem in Calgary, which they considered a significant advantage.

***“We’d used [other job boards] last year but this was a lot easier. [TalentED YYC] also outlined additional funding opportunities for us to pursue.”***

— SME employer interview, November 2024

The networking opportunities facilitated by TalentED YYC were another area of significant appreciation. Employers found value in connecting with institutions through the initiative and enjoyed events such as job fairs where they could interact directly with students. These activities helped employers bridge the gap

between their organizations and the student talent pool in a way that was both effective and rewarding.

Employer associations (i.e., Calgary Chamber of Commerce, the Nonprofit Chamber, and CPHR) expressed gratitude that a project like TalentED YYC was underway because their members had discussed the struggles of initiating and utilizing WIL to support their businesses and organizations. They indicated that the pilot was doing well in generating awareness about the program and the match-making potential with students, but more partnerships with these associations and other employers will be important to grow the messaging further. The associations spoke of employer workshops favourably, with one association finding them useful and effective, while the others believed in their value in theory but felt that in practice there was not enough uptake from employers to make an impact.

Employers identified several issues with the job portal, which many found confusing to navigate. Although TalentED YYC staff provided sufficient support to address these challenges, participants expressed concern that reduced support could exacerbate confu-



sion. Specific frustrations included the lack of filtering options, such as the ability to select specific institutions or target programs like “types of engineering.”

Other critiques of the platform included the limited time that job postings remained visible—typically only a week—and the way applications were forwarded to employers. Rather than being organized in a centralized system, applications were sent to individual email inboxes, which some participants found inefficient. A key area of concern for participants was that the portal did not truly act as a one stop solution for posting across all institutions at once, which how it was marketed to them.

While some employers experienced high success rates in attracting qualified candidates through the platform, several employers from small businesses felt unsupported during the subsequent hiring process. These employers expressed a need for additional guidance in candidate vetting and in navigating challenges such as visa requirements for international students. These gaps in support left some employers feeling that the initiative could be improved by expanding their support through the hiring process. Most employers expressing this sentiment understood that this might be beyond TalentED YYC’s current scope and were nonetheless grateful for the support already offered to them.

### *Employers Looking Forward*

Most employers expressed a strong willingness to continue using TalentED YYC and spoke highly of the initiative and its staff, even those who did share that they had challenges in the process. One area of opportunity for phase 2 lies in offering direct funding

to help pay students for their work-integrated learning experiences, similar to the support provided by organizations like Riipen. Employers noted that such funding would be incredibly valuable and could encourage broader participation.

***“I would 100% use it again and I plan to recommend TalentED to fellow start-up colleagues.”***

— Start-up employer interview, November 2024

There was hope that a phase two would provide increased support to non-profit employers, particularly in the marketing of non-profit WIL opportunities for students, since they are facing a challenge in building awareness among students of the professional and social rewards of working in the sector. Since the marketing team targets employers, not students, folding non-profit employers into iWIL activities was suggested as another potential way to address this challenge, as it would increase student understanding of the non-profit sector through direct contact with employers.

There was also interest in expanding the program beyond Calgary, as some employers believed that students from other regions of the province could bring additional value to their organizations. However, a key limitation of the current setup is the lack of a mechanism to track which students have been hired through TalentED YYC, making it difficult for employers to provide meaningful feedback on the program’s impact.

Although the proportion of students hired directly through the initiative has not been particularly high,



employers and employer associations remain optimistic about its potential and view it as a positive addition to the WIL ecosystem. To fully realize this potential, phase 2 will need to address these challenges while building on the initiative's strengths.

### **TalentED YYC Secretariate**

This section addresses feedback from the Secretariate, focusing on two key areas: technical issues and the perceptions and marketing of the initiative. Unlike other sections, the feedback here is not divided into value-added contributions and challenges due to the technical nature of the responses provided by participants.

Persistent technical issues were highlighted as a critical concern for the pilot program, with participants describing these problems as a significant barrier to the project's overall success. The limitations of the platform have not only been a source of internal frustration but have also stymied external engagement. For example, technical challenges have hindered effective marketing, reduced PSI engagement, and required an unsustainable investment of human resources to make the platform functional for employers. Participants expressed concern that the level of technical difficulty remains so pronounced at this stage of the project, with some noting their surprise at the ongoing nature of these challenges. Even when specific problems have been addressed, the solutions are often temporary, with new issues quickly arising to take their place.

These technical setbacks have had cascading effects on the pilot's ability to achieve its goals. Marketing efforts, for instance, have been constrained by the platform's limitations, while PSIs have struggled to engage fully due to the increased effort required to navigate the system. Ultimately, the technical difficulties have detracted from the platform's usability and undermined its perceived value among key stakeholders.

Despite the challenges of the technology and their effects on external perception of TalentED YYC, the Marketing and Communications Team succeeded in increasing employer engagement and brand recognition for TalentED YYC. This ensured that the EET had a consistent source of employer leads. There is a desire and hope among members of the Secretariate that additional avenues for employer-targeted marketing will take place in a phase two, echoing feedback from employers and employer associations.

TalentED YYC is widely viewed as an initiative with tremendous potential for impact. However, stakeholders agreed that the project has yet to fully realize this potential, citing a lack of visibility, awareness, and the time needed for relationship-building as key barriers. The perception of TalentED YYC remains positive overall, but achieving its high-impact goals will require more effective outreach and stronger connections with diverse employer groups and community organizations.

## Summative Learnings

This section highlights the key learnings that have contributed to the project's refinement and adaptations and can inform future endeavours across the country that involve WIL, fostering collaboration between individual PSIs, or connecting the needs of employers to the skills of students and vice versa. In line with the typical experiences of technology pilots in the edtech space, the TalentED YYC project faced several challenges, including technical integration issues, unexpected delays, and stakeholder diversity stretching the pilot's efforts and approaches. Most pilots undergo significant adjustments before scaling up, underscoring that these hurdles are a normal and valuable part of the iterative learning process.<sup>15</sup> By focusing on the lessons learned and the progress made thus far, this pilot becomes a crucial step toward achieving the desired long-term outcomes.



### **Pooling resources is an innovative approach complementary to individualized funding**

Pilot projects are in effect experiments that test a hypothesis. Underlining the Calgary WIL pilot project is the hypothesis that pooled resources serving a common goal and working in a formally collaborative environment can achieve more impact in a region than individualized resources working discretely or in informal collaboration.<sup>16</sup> This hypothesis represents an innovative approach to growing the WIL ecosystem in Calgary precisely because it does not directly funnel funds to individual PSIs, which is the standard for provincial funding.

Throughout HESA's evaluation, a recurring critique or impression of the pilot project was that the funding TalentED YYC received may have been put to better use if given directly to PSIs to increase their individual capacity to work toward the Alberta 2030 mandate of offering WIL for every student who wants it. Unlike an experiment in a laboratory, this pilot project does not have this alternative scenario as a control test. It cannot be known if this alternative path would have had more impact, if it would have benefited all the PSIs and the employers (particularly SMEs) at least as much as the TalentED YYC pilot has, or if this proposition—which would be to follow the standard direct funding to PSIs—would have been enticing to any of the pilot project funders, who expressed interest in the pilot's innovative approach to resource management.



What can be learned by this critique—which was most often shared alongside measured appreciation for the work TalentED YYC has accomplished to date—is that innovation and experimentation will always meet with skepticism. Engaging with this skepticism is necessary to some degree as it illuminates stakeholders’ concerns, pressure points, and ultimate goals. The TalentED YYC team has endeavoured to engage with the skepticism it has received throughout its pilot phase so that it can improve its service and design through this iterative process.

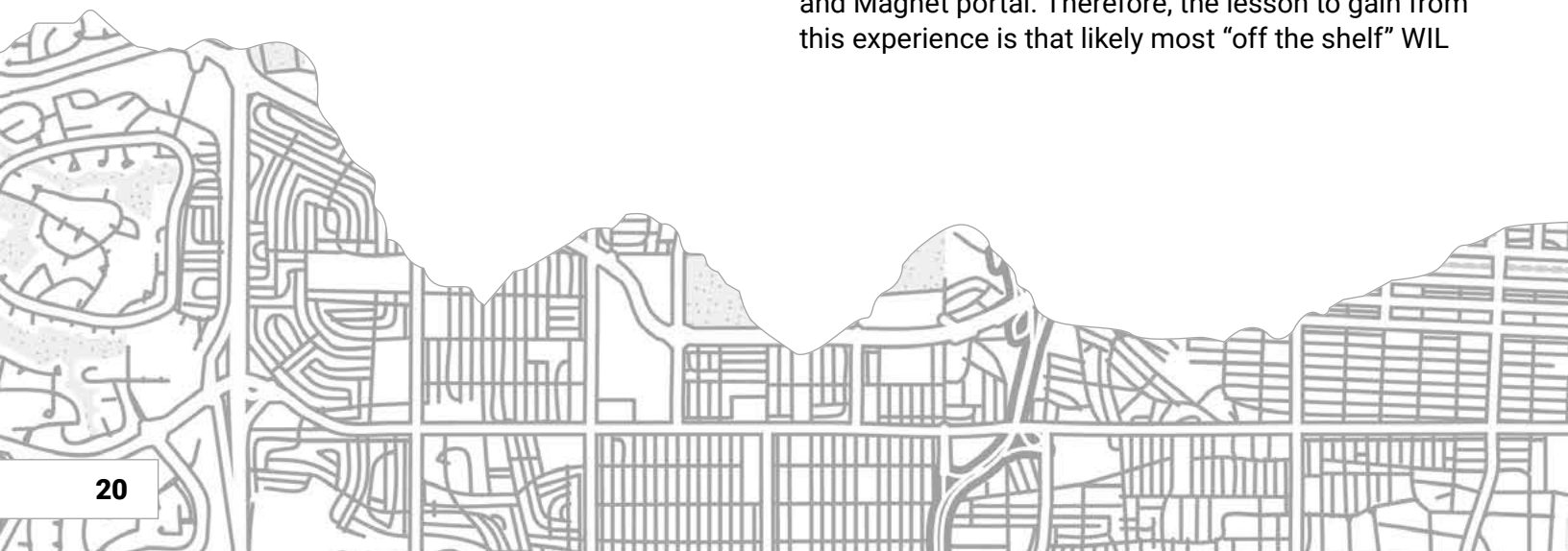
What is equally evident from this pilot is the degree to which the development of WIL activities has traditionally been highly relational, built upon personal connections and trust developed between employers and academic program faculty and staff, often over many years. This is a difficult model to scale up, particularly over a relatively compressed period of time and with a new agent such as the Secretariate serving as a hub. The Secretariate had to rely on the good will and conviction in their abilities by the institutions and employers, as TalentED YYC itself had no positional authority over either of the partners (some of whom, as has been previously stated, felt the funding would have been more effective provided to them directly).



## Technology alone will not fix a shortage in WIL opportunities

Initially, the pilot’s portal by Orbis and Magnet was poised as the main pillar and value of the project. It is what was going to make TalentED YYC a “one-stop-shop” for WIL in the Calgary region. As previous deliverables have stated, the limitations of the technology were not fully appreciated when its role was envisioned for the project. The technology cannot share critically important data with TalentED YYC without MoUs from PSIs, which is a valid protection for the portal’s PSI clients but caused a data gap that hamstrung TalentED YYC’s ability to self-assess its stated goals. This inability to fully assess impact and improvement continued throughout the pilot. The portal also has frequent and varying bugs in its features, from how (and whether) it sends WIL postings to the PSI portals to its user design experience. The technology partners had limited ability to address the bugs in a timely manner, leaving the Secretariate to devise solutions and workarounds to limit the effect on portal users. The technology’s shortcomings have led to unmet expectations among all involved in the pilot: PSI staff, employers, community partners, and the Secretariate, who have continuously adapted to those limitations, usually necessitating much manual work.

TalentED YYC is not the first client to experience issues with this portal when used for the purpose of collaboration between PSIs for WIL: The Vancouver Island WIL project, which began and ended before TalentED YYC launched in April 2023, did not continue in large part because of the difficulties of working between the partner institutions and with the Orbis and Magnet portal. Therefore, the lesson to gain from this experience is that likely most “off the shelf” WIL





portals will have some limitations, in no small part because they require student information that many institutions hesitate to share because WIL models and employers vary so greatly in key reporting areas.

The shortcomings and challenges of using this portal for the purposes TalentED YYC set out with—a one-stop-shop for employers, a frictionless and resource-light transfer of WIL opportunities to PSIs, and a data tracker for TalentED YYC and its funders—should be made widely known so that future initiatives can plan around these limitations, choose another platform that better aligns with their needs, or find a non-technological solution to their challenges.



### **Collaboration with and between PSIs takes time and capacity**

While PSIs share many similarities, they also operate with a degree of insularity that can pose challenges for inter-institutional collaboration and collaboration with non-PSI entities, even when there is the genuine desire and will to do so from those working at PSIs. They are often also inherently competitive regarding programming, and sharing usually occurs best when they are directly receiving incentives (e.g., funding) to do so. This was not the case for this pilot project. The pilot project required both kinds of collaboration from PSIs, as the institutions needed to be open to collaboration in the CoP and with TalentED YYC, a non-PSI entity.

Inter-institutional collaboration was a challenge because PSIs are largely idiosyncratic when it comes to processes and the delineation of duties and responsibilities among units, faculties, etc. Their size/enrolment, staff capacity, program offerings, location, reputation, and so on also play big roles in differenti-

ating institutions. Those who work within these institutions develop a keen and deep understanding of the workings of their own institution, but like any specialists, this can narrow their field vision to what is most applicable to their institution and its unique position. Inter-institutional collaboration, like what comes from the CPDT's CoP, thus requires a fair bit of translation between PSI staff about their processes and approaches to find useful comparisons and lessons.

Nonetheless, the CPDT has successfully brought 60 PSI WIL practitioners together in the CoP to work through issues and challenges and to share learnings. This was achieved in large part through the CPDT's consistent communication and feedback gathering from PSI staff early in the project. The team quickly adapted the CoP meeting topics to PSI interests, including discussions of the particular challenge of growing WIL in institutions of differing size. While the challenge of idiosyncratic institutions remains, TalentED YYC has put concerted effort into serving the needs of smaller institutions and ensuring they are part of these conversations.

As a non-PSI entity, TalentED YYC faced growing pains in its initial work with PSIs, largely because of PSIs' different cadence of operation compared to industry (i.e., things move slowly, staff turnover is frequent, start/end of terms are extremely busy, no one might be on campus in summer, etc.) and the relatively quick turn arounds the CPDT needed to meet. To be successful, the project needed to learn the WIL-related processes of each institution and their WIL-offering programs. This knowledge base informed the CPDT's support work for PSIs and the EET's work with employers. The bulk of this work was necessarily front-loaded in the pilot, but this meant



that the work—requiring the PSI staff to walk the CPDT through its WIL processes—was the first introduction to TalentED YYC for most of the PSI staff and it was occurring at the same time as the portal’s limitations were being uncovered. This drain on resources and immediate issues with the portal hindered TalentED YYC’s relationship-building with PSI staff. This underlines the importance of planning early “quick wins” and value adds to partners to gain their trust and buy-in.

Finally, institutional support was initially provided for the pilot concept by the highest levels of the partner institutions (i.e., Presidents, VPAs etc.) who then passed along their conceptual support to their management and operational level staff. In most cases, this came with no additional resources to those called upon to carry out the “extra” work required of their participation in TalentED YYC’s activities. For much of the project, there was a continued degree of confusion amongst the leadership group—many of whom had changed over the course of the project—about the project itself as outlined in TalentED YYC’s charter, and how to best realize those promises collaboratively.



### **SMEs benefit from a bridging entity between themselves and PSIs**

The vision of the pilot was to develop and demonstrate a viable regional approach to building and supporting community capacity to scale WIL. As the project evolved, it became clear to the pilot project team and their stakeholders that the main value add of TalentED YYC was their connection to employers through CED and the work of the EET and MCT, whose

outreach and marketing efforts targeted employers.

Since the complexity and variety in PSIs’ approach to WIL was widely identified as a barrier to employer participation, the pilot swiftly narrowed its focus to making WIL easier to navigate for employers. Before TalentED YYC acted as a bridge between PSIs and employers, SME employers had been at a particular disadvantage in the WIL space. They have less HR capacity to navigate PSIs’ WIL infrastructures, they are more likely to need support and reading-in to WIL from PSI WIL practitioners (who are also consistently facing resource constraints), and their small size limits their capacity to take on many WIL students, giving the PSI investment into their support a lower return.

The pilot project has succeeded in making WIL much more accessible to SME employers through informative marketing campaigns, direct support, workshops, referrals to funding sources, and resource generation. Being housed in CED and having employer associations as partners and collaborators (e.g., the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, the Nonprofit Chamber, and CPHR Alberta) has allowed TalentED YYC to reach wide, pre-established employer audiences with their positive and approachable messaging around WIL. Employers consistently praised TalentED YYC’s support during their interviews with HESA, with several indicating that it was not until they received TalentED’s guidance that they could successfully engage with WIL and reap the professional, social, and financial benefits of this participation.

While this outcome demonstrates and validates the central role of relationships in WIL, the sustainability



of such complimentary support from an organization like TalentED YYC toward SMEs needs to be further explored. The TalentED YYC team used its technology platforms and generated employer resources to automate as much of the support process as possible, but future project phases or comparable initiatives should continue to workshop and test more ways to streamline the support process to be less resource-intensive so that more SMEs can be supported.



## Projects provide an accessible pathway into WIL

TalentED YYC has played an essential role in growing opportunities for employer-sponsored WIL projects among its partnered PSIs. Capstone projects provide an accessible form of WIL to employers, requiring less infrastructure and capacity from an employer than more common WIL types (e.g., internships, co-ops). They are focused on an employer's challenge or need and undertaken by one or more students under the supervision of a faculty member. They allow the learning part of work-integrated learning to be facilitated by the faculty member—who helps their students make connections between the work experience requirements and their classroom learning, thereby providing useful assistance to employer supervisors.

Employers interviewed by HESA liked participating in projects because of how straightforward it was to administer them. Projects can pose less financial burden and risk to employers because they are often unpaid when they are essential components of a student's course. The WIL type also allows employers

to address finite capacity gaps in different business areas (e.g., launching a website, gathering data on market competitors, etc.) without needing to hire contractors from multiple professions, foreseeing whether there is enough work to occupy a full-time staff member indefinitely, or trying to fill a full-time staff position with a jack-of-all-trades candidate that has all the relevant experience.

On the student side, projects expand the diversity of WIL opportunities available so that students who are not participating in programs that traditionally offer internships or co-ops can still benefit from the learning method. For instance, through TalentED YYC's work facilitating employer-sponsored projects, AUArts students conceptualized a new product for a local brewery through the guidance of a local design agency. Students in SAIT's School for Advanced Digital Technology created videos for promotion purposes and created language learning curriculums for newcomer youth. Other WIL projects facilitated by TalentED YYC included analyzing vegetation recovery zones after technology projects were completed, wildlife habitat sensitivity mapping, and supporting partnerships and grants for community partners.

With faculty guidance, projects provide students with a quality WIL experience that exemplifies the connection between their studies and real-world application. Students participating in employer-sponsored projects can use these experiences to build their professional network and portfolio before they graduate and (re-)enter the labour market with their new skills.

When facilitated by TalentED YYC, projects also provide a less resource-intensive WIL type for PSI WIL



practitioners, who are saved from the effort of conducting outreach and support to SMEs to build interest and scope the opportunity. TalentED YYC's work has proven especially useful for increasing the number of GoA-recognized WIL opportunities within smaller institutions that had programs with capstone projects but few or none with traditional WIL components.

The support that the pilot has offered employers and PSIs alike has been instrumental to growing the implementation of employer-sponsored projects and the positive reception of projects amongst all stakeholders demonstrates their value and their effectiveness in expanding the diversity and quantity of employers and WIL opportunities in Calgary.



### **WIL complexities are reflected in funder metrics**

This pilot project was tasked with reaching several goals from funders, the definitions of which each varied according to what WIL types, stakeholders, and impacts were of primary interest to each funder. These varied goals required the Secretariate to develop logics and parameters to their KPI tracking and reporting, but these logics were not always clear in monthly reports nor were they consistent throughout the project since metrics needed to be adapted alongside the unfolding limitations of the portal's data reporting. These complexities sometimes led to confusion and questions from stakeholders receiving the monthly reports.

These variables reflect the idiosyncrasies of WIL with which experts and practitioners in the space continue to grapple. TalentED YYC's early process mapping with PSIs and its comprehensive WIL catalogue show that WIL tends to be handled piecemeal across institutions. Centralized WIL offices—when they exist in PSIs—are tasked with monitoring, reporting, prospecting, and administering a selection of WIL types within the institution, more often based on historical divisions and personalities than an overarching logic. These complexities make categorizing and counting WIL opportunities within an institution challenging enough, let alone comparing these metrics across time or across institutions, provinces, or countries.

These complexities affected the degree of clarity with which progress and change could be tracked and communicated within this pilot project, as the funders' metrics did not always clearly map onto the data TalentED YYC gathered from PSIs and during its own activities. Tracking so many different KPIs also put a strain on resources within TalentED YYC, as KPIs and reports had to be tailored to every separate funder. While the Secretariate fulfilled its role of tracking its progress, this overall challenge remains unsolved as it is inextricably tied to the complexities of WIL. Funders, stakeholders, and those working on tracking WIL-related metrics should be prepared to clarify the meaning of the KPIs they set and encounter to be certain that the indicators are accurately understood before making comparisons across them or generating conclusions about impact.



## Looking Ahead

The Calgary WIL Secretariate has contributed to building awareness of WIL amongst employers, providing education opportunities for employers and PSI staff, and connecting stakeholders to each other. The individual and institutional impacts of their work are described throughout this report and set the stage for future growth. In these actions, the Secretariate is contributing to the development of a WIL ecosystem in Calgary, which is still in its infancy. CED has a key role to play in facilitating the outreach and growth of the Secretariate through continued collaboration in events and leveraging of its employer contacts.

At the end of 2024, the pilot project has met or exceeded most funder expectations and still has three months to go in the pilot's runway. The TalentED YYC team has contributed to building awareness of WIL amongst employers, providing education and networking opportunities for employers and PSI staff, and connecting stakeholders to each other. The project has tested what an innovative approach to growing WIL could look like within Calgary, producing learnings that can be applied beyond the city.

Acting as a bridge between PSIs and employers, TalentED YYC has succeeded in demystifying WIL for many SME employers who were interested in participating in WIL but did not know where to start, did not have the time to navigate the new space, or who thought that WIL was not a viable option for their organization. Since SMEs account for 99.8% of Alberta's businesses<sup>17</sup> and 66% of the province's workforce,<sup>18</sup> developing SME capacity and familiarity with WIL serves a crucial role in expanding the WIL ecosystem of the province. TalentED YYC is working to fill this gap in Calgary and is set up well to focus and scale its efforts in a potential phase two. The pilot project has collected knowledge about the barriers to WIL facing SMEs, non-profit organizations, and startups. It has also identified plenty of opportunities for more targeted forms of employer support, often growing on its current practices of employer workshops, resource development, connecting SMEs with funding sources, and hosting iWIL.



The opportunities the project created for PSI WIL practitioners to network and learn from peers in the Community of Practice and the project teams' collation of all the partnered PSIs' WIL opportunities into the WIL catalogue are stand out benefits according to the PSI stakeholders engaged throughout this evaluation. The formative evaluative components of the project and the many feedback mechanisms for PSI stakeholders have allowed the project team to reassess their approaches as they go and respond directly to PSI needs as feasible. Through this iterative process, TalentED YYC has refined its scope and limited its duplication of work in the WIL space while also finding its niche in providing essential SME employer support.

TalentED YYC's work, like any pilot project, has not been without its challenges. How the project has been perceived and received by its partners and stakeholders has varied, with hope, gratitude, and a commitment to moving forward in constructive ways living alongside the skepticism that arises when technological challenges arise and new approaches are being tested. Issues with the portal impacted some employers' success in posting WIL opportunities, resulting in opportunities going unfilled and some employers losing trust in the project's value proposition. The project team entered the notoriously slow-moving and resource-constrained space of post-secondary education when it was facing an urgent need for scaled WIL operations. Quickly embracing a new entity like TalentED, especially in a time of scarcity, challenged PSI WIL practitioners and

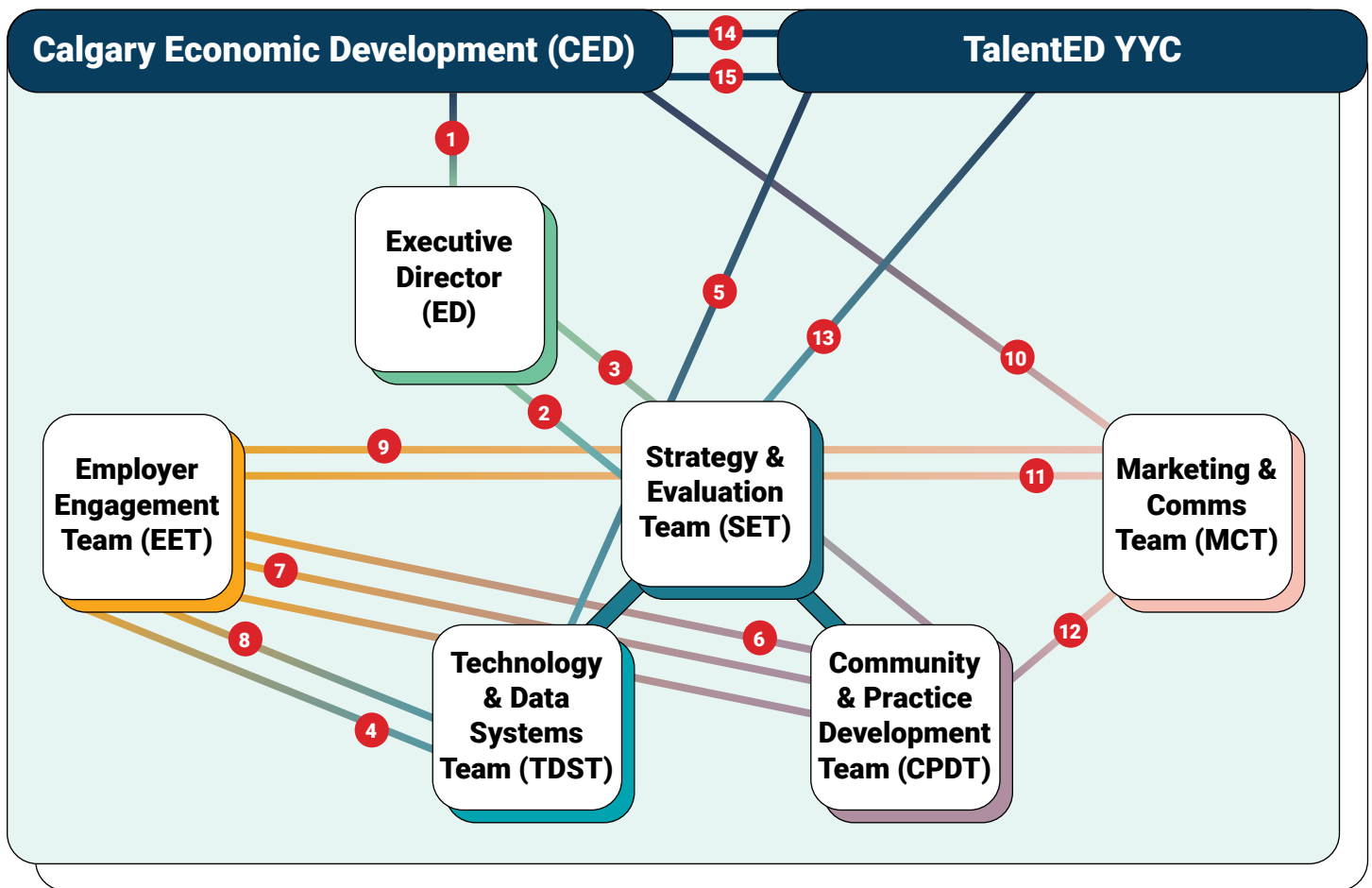
leaders, but most stayed engaged with the project even through this challenge. TalentED was made all the better for this continued and nuanced engagement, closing this pilot phase with a clearer sense of the project's value propositions and place within the WIL ecosystem in the Calgary region and beyond.

Alongside the project's successes, there remains the issue of technology. The high hopes that the Orbis/Magnet portal would solve many administrative challenges were not met, in fact the work arounds often necessitated more manual labour than what was saved through its modest automation practices. A sufficient alternative has not been identified, but the limitations of this technology are now well-documented through the pilot project's evaluation reports, which could provide a cursory roadmap to potential new technology development or updates that could truly fill the needs of the WIL ecosystem.

The individual and institutional impacts of TalentED YYC's work are described throughout this report and set the stage for future growth in a potential phase two. In these actions, TalentED YYC is contributing to the development of a WIL ecosystem in Calgary, which is still in its infancy. In a phase two of the project, CED will have a key role to play in facilitating the outreach and growth of TalentED through continued collaboration in events and leveraging of its employer contacts.

# Appendix A

## HOW AND WHY THE TEAMS WORK TOGETHER



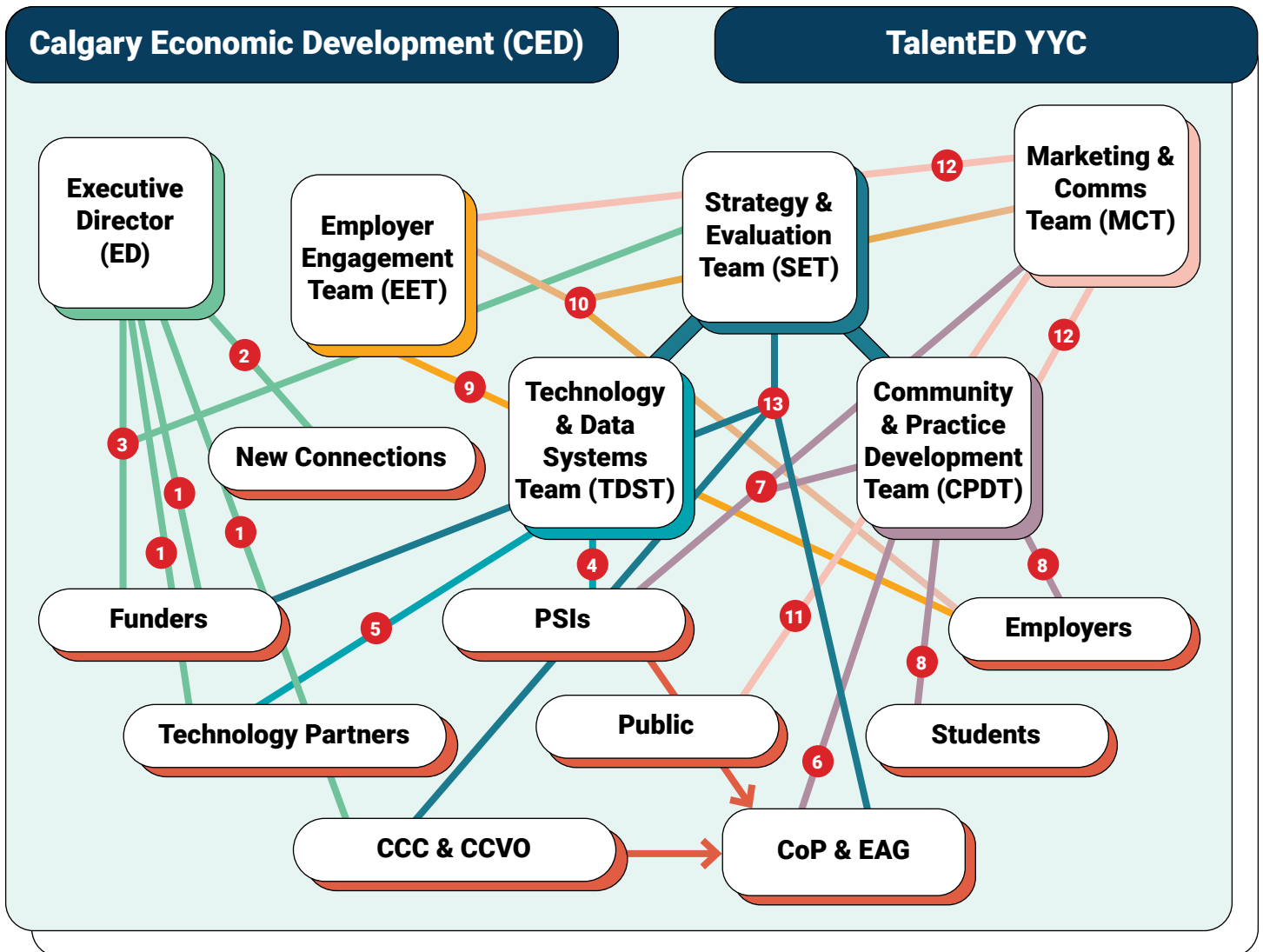
### Legend of Activities

- |  |   |   |  |
|--|---|---|--|
| <p><b>1</b> ED explores ways to collaborate within CED</p> <p><b>2</b> ED collaborates with SET, to write and distribute monthly TalentED YYC project reports for stakeholders</p> <p><b>4</b> TDST supports EET with their configuration and use of the Orbis/Magnet portal</p> | <p><b>5</b> TDST facilitates internal process mapping for TalentED YYC</p> <p><b>6</b> CPDT works with the EET to identify WIL programs at partnering PSIs that can benefit from employer referrals</p> <p><b>7</b> EET works with the CPDT, acts as liaison for employers</p> <p><b>8</b> EET works with the TDST for Orbis/Magnet and HubSpot support</p> | <p><b>9</b> EET collaborates with MCT on communications to employers</p> <p><b>10</b> MCT provides TalentED YYC updates to CED staff</p> <p><b>11</b> MCT supports the EET with marketing</p> <p><b>12</b> MCT supports the CPDT with marketing</p> <p><b>13</b> SET oversees strategic planning, KPI collection, reporting, and internal process enhancements.</p> | <p><b>14</b> TalentED YYC leverages internal and external CED contacts to engage new employers in discussions about the value and accessibility of WIL</p> <p><b>15</b> CED facilitates conversations between TalentED YYC and economic development and governmental agencies in other municipalities to discuss scaling</p> |
|--|---|---|--|

# The TalentED YYC Network

TalentED YYC’s objective of fostering reciprocal relationships with its partners, funders, and stakeholders has generated a new network within the existing WIL ecosystem in Calgary.

## OUTWARD FACING ACTIVITIES



### Legend of Activities

- 1** ED liaises with funders (current and potential) and other major partners
- 2** ED prospects for funding and opportunities to collaborate
- 3** ED oversees SET’s reporting and KPI submissions to funders
- 4** TDST supports partnering PSIs with their configuration and use of the Orbis/Magnet portal
- 5** TDST liaises with the technology partners
- 6** CPDT supports a WIL Community of Practice across seven partnered PSIs in Calgary and the CCC and CCVO
- 7** CPDT hosts workshops and events for PSI practitioners and students with support from MCT
- 8** CPDT coordinates and administers student and employer surveys for data collection (I-WIL)
- 9** EET conducts outreach with employers
- 10** EET co-hosts workshops to educate employers
- 11** MCT maintains the TalentED YYC website; produces content for LinkedIn, blog, and newsletter
- 12** MCT supports the EET and CPDT with marketing outreach and coordination of events
- 13** SET engages CoP & EAG, CCC & CCVO, and Funders in strategic planning activities



# Endnotes

- 1** In some cases, the partner PSI was not able to launch the shared portal and would receive WIL postings from TalentED YYC through email.
- 2** The team acronyms are not used externally and are only listed to simplify the wording of the report.
- 3** HESA's previous deliverables: 1) A scan of WIL types and initiatives similar to TalentED YYC; 2) Lessons learned from the first few months of the project; 3) A theory of change workshop facilitated by HESA and a knowledge mobilization product to illustrate the intended impacts of the project; 4) A 2023 Annual Report summarizing and evaluating the year's activities; and 5) A sustainability and scalability report providing case studies on similar initiatives to inform an outline for how TalentED YYC could scale in a second phase.
- 4** HESA secured ethics approval from Veritas IRB for its interviews with stakeholders.
- 5** CED's Economic Intelligence team helped TalentED YYC conduct the analysis using Statistics Canada data and multipliers.
- 6** The CCC, the Nonprofit Chamber, AUArts, Bow Valley College, SAIT, and St. Mary's signed the charter, whereas Ambrose, MRU, and UCalgary did not. Ambrose did not sign the charter because as the project progressed they realized that the project's time commitment was higher than the potential benefits of the project for the institution, primarily because their small size limited their capacity to take full advantage of the project's resources, like the Campus Connect portal, which they did not implement.
- 7** The CCC, the Nonprofit Chamber, BVC, SAIT, and St. Mary's signed MOUs, whereas AU Arts and MRU did not. An MOU with Ambrose was no longer pursued once the institution decided not to implement the portal, and an agreement with UCalgary is pending. AUArts, another small institution, did not have the capacity and resourcing for the legal review required to sign an MOU, so they did sign the charter but not the MOU.
- 8** While tracking economic impact is an agreed upon condition for GoA funding, neither GoA nor TalentED YYC set a target for the KPI.
- 9** This number is a projection stemming from the economic impact analysis using data from February 2023 and December 2024.
- 10** BHER specified the following equity-deserving groups for this KPI: women, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, students who identify as being a visible minority, and international students.
- 11** BHER's original target for the number of employers with whom TalentED YYC should engage was 300, but this was revised to 180 in May 2024 to reflect the negative impact of the portal's issues on the EET's capacity to conduct employer engagement.

- 12** Stakeholders brought up uncertainty about the KPIs and what was being tracked in interviews with HESA and in informal conversations that were occasionally shared with the project team’s members, usually indirectly (i.e., word of mouth). The team was prepared to have in-depth discussions about their KPIs but, to their recollection, they were not asked to do so by any stakeholder.
- 13** Among employers interviewed across HESA’s evaluation activities, those that had previously offered WIL opportunities had shared that opportunity with up to two PSIs in Calgary, with some employers admitting that they did not know there were more PSIs in the city.
- 14** i.e., the project’s community partners: Calgary Chamber of Commerce and the Nonprofit Chamber (formerly the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations).
- 15** (1) <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-journey-to-an-agile-organization>, (2) <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-organization-blog/get-agile-faster-through-pilot-programs>.
- 16** We use the term “informal collaboration” here to refer to networks that are built through “who you know” (i.e., personal and professional networks built over time, exposure, and often through personality and varying forms of privilege) and work “off the side of the desk” (i.e., work undertaken in addition to a full slate, thus with less accountabilities or protected time to foster measured attention). Informal collaboration is invaluable and will always have an important role in the WIL ecosystem, and “formal collaboration” is not envisioned to supplant it. However, formal collaboration has set accountabilities to guide labour and resources and is explicitly open to all, employing proactive connections between people regardless of who knows who. Formal networks for collaboration—when well-supported—can have greater impact in engaging stakeholders regardless of their professional networks or their institution’s status in the sector, and make a useful addition to the WIL ecosystem.
- 17** <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/key-small-business-statistics/key-small-business-statistics-2023#s1.1>
- 18** <https://businesscouncilab.com/insights-category/economic-insights/weekly-econminute-employment-by-business-size-in-alberta/>

20 Maud Street  
Suite 207  
Toronto, ON  
M5V 2M5  
Canada

+1 (416) 848-0215  
info@higherstrategy.com

**higherstrategy.com**



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