

# EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF A TOURISM MENTORSHIP PROGRAM ON CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION

This report uncovers how mentorship programs boost co-op education,  
enhance employer engagement, and support student careers.

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## Abstract

This research report explores the impact of a tourism mentorship program on co-operative education, specifically within the context of the Tourism Management program at Thompson Rivers University (TRU). By examining the preliminary benefits, challenges, and overall effectiveness of mentorship in the tourism sector, this study provides insights into how such programs can enhance the educational and professional outcomes for students. Data were collected through interviews with employers and surveys of students. The findings suggest that mentorship programs would significantly strengthen students' practical skills, industry knowledge, and career readiness. However, challenges such as funding, program structure, and employer engagement need to be addressed to maximize the program's benefits.

## Introduction

### Background

Co-operative education integrates academic learning with practical work experience, allowing students to apply knowledge learnt in the classroom to real-world settings. In the tourism industry, characterized by continuous changes and diverse job roles, co-operative education is crucial for preparing students for the workforce. Mentorship programs would be a valuable component of co-operative education, providing guidance, industry insights, and professional development opportunities for students.

### Research Goals

The primary goal of this research is to assess the impact of the tourism mentorship program on the career development of undergraduate students in the Tourism Management program at TRU. This study investigates how the tourism industry interacts with academic institutions and assesses the effect of the mentorship program into the curriculum can enhance networking opportunities for tourism students and increase employer participation. Additionally, the study analyzes how incorporating the mentorship program into the curriculum can strengthen networking opportunities for tourism students and increase employer participation.

## Literature Review

Research into Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and cooperative education (co-op) is robust; however, patterns of information begin to emerge. One of these patterns is the inclusion of multiple stakeholders. This is often represented as a tripartite relationships between students, employers, and their higher education institutions (HEIs) (BHER, 2016 ; Henderson & Trede, 2017). Hay, 2020 acknowledges a tripartite relationship model between stakeholders, but suggests that utilizing a quadripartite lens of looking at collaborators might be useful. Fergusson, Laan, Imran, & Ormsby (2021) cite the OECD (2015) in their analysis of co-op as a “product of five advocates”: “[...] the student; ... the work environment; ... the higher education institution... industry support; and...

government policies". McRae, Pretti, & Church's (2018) AAA\* framework identifies five stakeholders also: students, educators, employers, HEIs, and government organizations. Thompson Rivers University (TRU's) Career & Experiential Learning (CEL) team subscribe to this method specifically for its quality-assurance outlines contained in the Pedagogy Experience Assessment Reflection (PEAR) framework (McRae et al., 2018). Based on Khampirat & McRae's (2016) Global Standards Framework, TRU assumes *quality WIL* to be WIL programs that satisfy the goals all stakeholders, while implementing efforts to improve them (McRae et al., 2018). TRU's tourism CEL team agree with Keating (2012)'s quote, echoing Spowatt, 2009, that "the vocational nature of hospitality management is ideal to utilize work-integrated learning as a method of transferring classroom activities to the workplace", hence, all TRU tourism programs now have a mandated co-op term. With the increased number of students engaging in co-op, there is increased importance to continuously assess and elevate (McRae et al., 2018) the co-op program. The TRU tourism CEL team hypothesizes that by applying the PEAR framework to the Tourism Sponsorship Program, we can ensure a high-quality, ever-improving WIL program that creates better outcomes in regarding student expectation and goal setting, pre-training, and heightened knowledge if a placement will be a great student fit.

## Methods

### Ethics Approval

Ethics approval for this study was obtained in April 2024 (File # 103871, 103870, 103568)

## Data Collection

### Employer Engagement Interviews

Eleven interviews were conducted with tourism industry stakeholders between May and June 2024. The interviews aimed to gather detailed insights into the employers' engagement with co-operative education programs, engagement with post secondary institutions, and TRU.

### Student Surveys

Surveys were distributed to co-op program participants during the Winter 2024 Co-op 1000: Career Management course. The surveys aimed to assess the students' experience with the co-op program and its impact on their career development.

## Analysis

**Qualitative:** Thematic analysis of interview transcripts to identify recurring themes.

**Quantitative:** Statistical analysis of survey data to assess the program's impact on student experience.

## Findings

### Tourism Sectors of Organizations/Employers Interviewed

The study included interviews with employers from various sectors of the tourism industry, providing a comprehensive view of the industry's engagement with co-operative education. The sectors represented included:

Attraction	1
Accommodation	2
Attraction/Resort	2
Destination Marketing Organizations	2
Tour Operator	1
Culinary Tourism	1
Attraction/Sports Tourism	1
Transportation/Tour Operator	1

Of the 11 employers interviewed, 10 are based in British Columbia and 1 in Ontario. This distribution reflects a regional focus, primarily within British Columbia.

## Results

### *Engagement and Connection with PSIs and TRU*

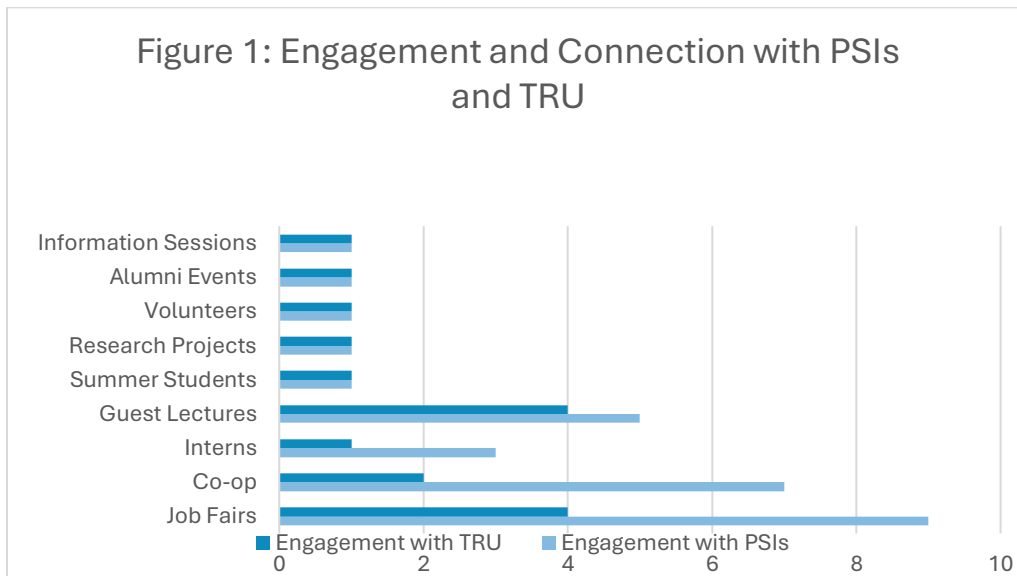


Figure 1 illustrates the level of engagement that tourism employers have with post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in general compared to TRU across various activities. The data reveal that employers participate more actively with other PSIs than with TRU in most categories.

#### *Job Fairs*

Nine employers reported participating in job fairs organized by various PSIs, indicating a strong presence and interest in connecting with a broad student base. However, only four employers reported participating in TRU job fairs, suggesting a need for TRU to increase visibility and participation from tourism employers.

#### *Co-op Programs*

Seven employers engage with co-op programs at various PSIs, showing a preference for long-term structured student work placements. In contrast, only two employers participate in TRU's co-op program, indicating significant room for growth in this area.

#### *Internships*

Only three employers provide internship opportunities through other PSIs, indicating a more selective approach to short-term student placements. At TRU, only one employer offers internships, highlighting limited engagement.

#### *Guest Lectures*

Five employers participate in guest lectures at various PSIs, showcasing their willingness to share industry knowledge and expertise. Four employers are involved with guest lectures at TRU, indicating some consistency with general PSI engagement but still below potential.

### Other Engagements

Activities such as summer students, research projects, volunteers, alumni events, and information sessions each had limited participation, reflecting more specialized and less frequent interactions.

### Analysis

TRU's engagement with employers is significantly lower compared to other PSIs, indicating a need for TRU to enhance its outreach and communication strategies to increase employer awareness and participation.

### Familiarity with TRU Tourism Program and Courses

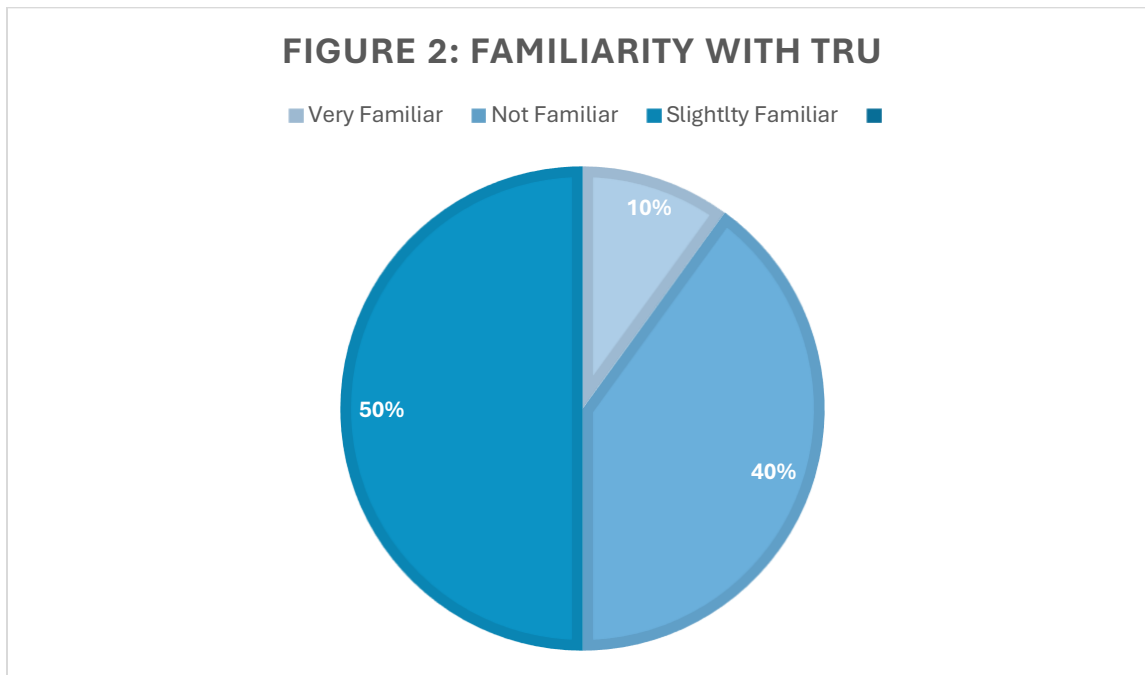


Figure 2 explores employers' familiarity with TRU's tourism program and courses. From the 11 tourism employers interviewed, the familiarity levels were as follows:

- Very Familiar = 10%
- Slightly Familiar = 50%
- Not Familiar = 40%

### Insights

While most employers are aware that TRU has a tourism program, many lack detailed knowledge about the program specifics. This suggests that while the program's existence is known, its details and benefits are not effectively reaching employers. Some employers mentioned past connections with TRU that have diminished over time due to retiring contacts or disruptions caused by COVID-19, and some due to the business itself not focusing on TRU.

## Benefits and Motivation for Employers to Engage with PSIs and Students

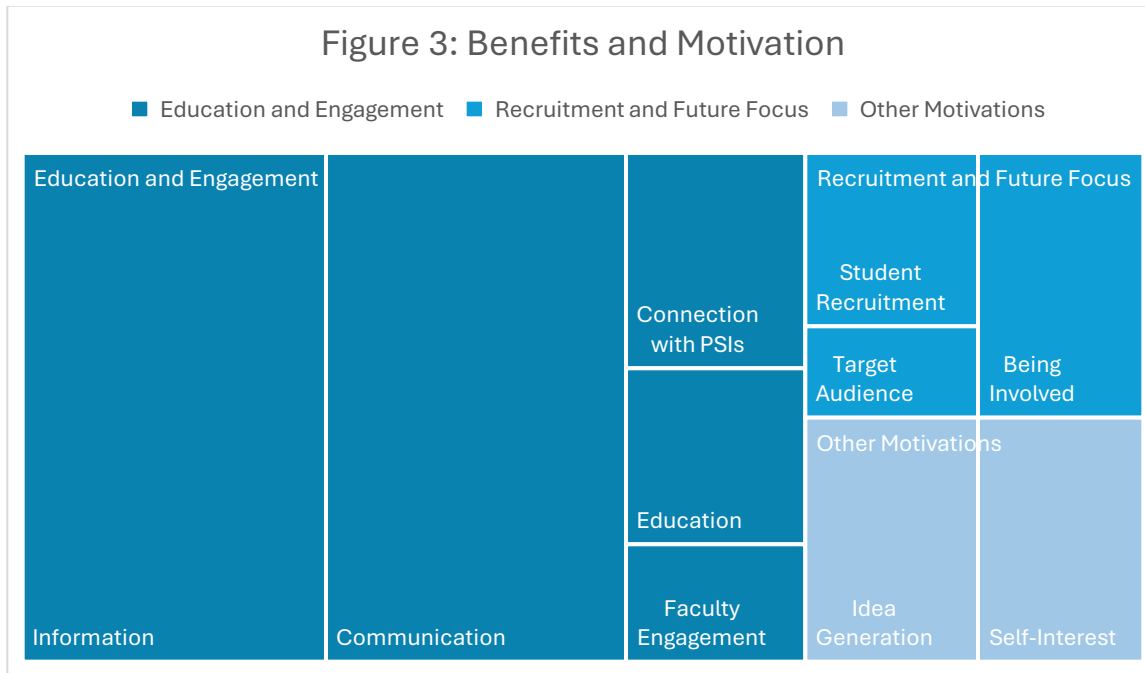


Figure 3 categories common themes and words representing the main benefits and motivations for employers to engage with PSIs and students. These motivations are divided into three sections: Education and Engagement, Recruitment and Future Focus, and Other Motivations.

### *Education and Engagement*

Employers value establishing and maintaining connections with educational institutions as a way to contribute to the educational process and influence curriculum development. Interaction with faculty is beneficial and enhances employers' involvement. Employers appreciate receiving up-to-date information about the school, campus events, programs, and opportunities, with communication being a key motivator for staying in touch with PSIs.

### *Recruitment and Future Focus*

Engaging with PSIs is a strategic move for employers to recruit future students. Employers see students as a key target audience for their recruitment efforts, relaying information, and understanding what students are learning. Active involvement in educational activities keeps employers connected to future trends and workforce needs, allowing them to hire well-prepared graduates.

### *Other Motivations*

Employers benefit from the fresh perspective and ideas that students bring. Engagement with students and PSIs helps innovation and new ideas, strengthening the employers' work environment and business strategies.

Employers emphasized mutual benefits, noting that engagement helps them understand the next generation's priorities and integrate new ideas into their organizations. These motivations underline

the importance of fostering strong, reciprocal relationships between TRU and industry stakeholders.

### *Challenges Employers Face with Experiential Learning*

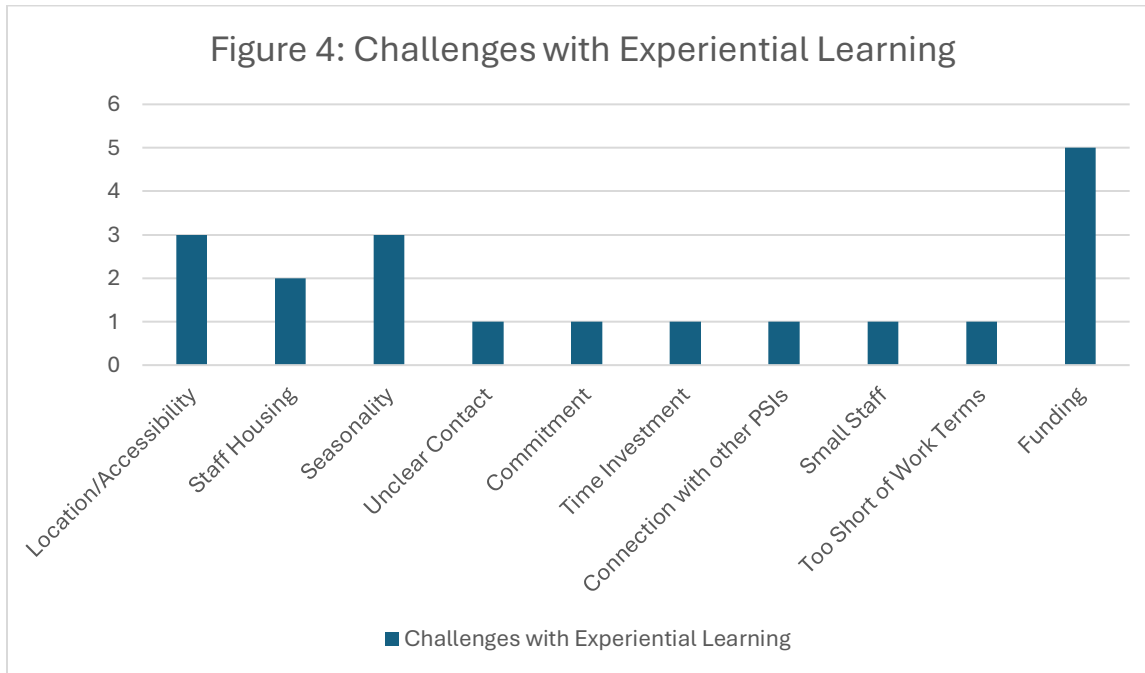


Figure 4 outlines the challenges employers face when engaging in experiential learning programs, based on the feedback from the 11 interviewed employers.

#### *Funding*

Five employers highlighted funding as the most significant challenge, affecting their ability to host and support students. Financial resources are critical, with many employers mentioning the Canada Summer Jobs Grant as a potential aid.

#### *Location/Accessibility*

Three employers mentioned that their geographical location makes it difficult to attract students. Employers in remote or less accessible locations struggle to bring students in for experiential learning opportunities.

#### *Seasonality*

Three employers brought up seasonality as a challenge, affecting the continuity and consistency of work terms. The academic calendar often does not align with the tourism season, creating mismatches in availability and demand for student workers.

#### *Staff Housing*

Two employers face issues providing adequate housing for students, making it difficult to interact with universities that are not near their business.

### *Other Challenges*

Single employers mentioned issues like unclear contact points within institutions, ensuring commitment levels, the time investment required for training and mentoring students, existing connections with other PSIs, small staff sizes, and short work term duration.

Employers highlighted the importance of clear communication and commitment from both sides. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts to ensure that students can benefit from meaningful experiential learning opportunities while employers can manage practical constraints successfully.

## **Integrating the Mentorship Program**

Integrating the mentorship program within the Co-op 1000 course benefits both students and employers. Students gain valuable networking opportunities and career development support, while employers' benefit from a more skilled and engaged workforce. The program helps bridge the gap between academic learning and practical industry experience, strengthening students' readiness for the workforce.

## **Importance of Structured Industry-Academic Collaboration**

The research highlights the importance of structured industry-academic collaboration in improving co-operative education outcomes. Deepening partnerships between TRU and industry stakeholders can enhance recruitment strategies, workforce development, and the overall quality of the educational experience for students. By fostering deeper connections with employers, TRU can ensure that its programs remain relevant and aligned with industry needs.

## **Implications**

### *For TRU*

Implementing the Tourism Mentorship Program model can serve as an effective strategy within tourism co-operative education programs, advancing student career development and employer engagement.

### *For Industry Stakeholders*

Strengthened partnerships with academic institutions can improve recruitment strategies and workforce development, providing mutual benefits for employers and students.

## **Conclusion**

The tourism mentorship program has a significant positive impact on co-operative education, enriching students' practical skills, industry knowledge, and career readiness. Addressing challenges such as funding, program structure, and employer engagement is crucial for maximizing the program's benefits. Enhanced communication and marketing efforts by TRU can further improve employer participation and strengthen industry-academic partnerships.

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