

How experiential learning in Durham Region benefits both students and local businesses

By Jennifer Foden

Durham Region—which has been recognized as the Intelligent Community of the Year—is home to not one, not two, but three post-secondary institutions: [Durham College](#), [Ontario Tech University](#) and [Trent University Durham GTA](#). And what sets these schools apart from the rest? Their focus on experiential learning opportunities.

“Students in every program at Trent University Durham GTA have an opportunity to complete an experiential learning opportunity, including paid co-op, internships, specialized placements, practica, community-based research, capstone projects, living labs and global work experiences,” says Kristen Papadacos, team lead, workplace partnerships and experiential learning at Trent University Durham GTA. (The Oshawa satellite campus of the Peterborough liberal arts university has more than 50 programs ranging from English, communications and artificial intelligence.)

Like Trent, every single one of Ontario Tech’s 91 undergraduate and graduate programs offers experiential learning opportunities, and most of Durham College’s 145 programs do too. Ontario Tech and Durham College have joint campuses in north Oshawa, with the university offering programs like engineering, nursing, education and business, and the college offering everything from paralegal studies and information technology to graphic design and automotive technician.

The benefits for the student are vast. In addition to course credit or payment, they gain hands-on work experience, grow their network and acquire career clarity. “It can confirm what they want to do,” says Anna De Grauwe, director of experiential learning at Durham College. “But also helps them realize if they need to or want to pivot. Maybe it turns out the field isn’t for them or maybe it’s a segment of the field isn’t for them... We might hear a student say, ‘Oh wow, commuting, yeah, not so interested in that anymore after doing it every day for four months.’ Or conversely, ‘Remote work was actually really lonely. I think I want to be where the people are.’”

From a business’ point of view, hiring students can also be super beneficial. There is government funding and tax incentives, which are a cost-effective way to fill temporary or project-based roles or supplement existing staff during peak periods or leaves. It also allows businesses to assess personnel before making a long-term hire—a screening process, so to speak. “And it really helps them to be able to learn exactly what the younger generation is bringing to the table,” says Shenelle Payne Cuffy, manager of career services and experiential learning at Ontario Tech. Students today are entering the workforce with cutting-edge technology skills—from data analytics and digital marketing to AI and automation—and a fresh perspective on how to leverage these tools to drive innovation and business growth. This makes Durham’s students a top-tier talent pool for forward-thinking employers.”

If employers have reservations about working with students, Papadakos says not to worry. "I think businesses are increasingly feeling the pressure to do more with less and that can sometimes trickle down into their capacity for being open to working with students," she shares. "I want employers to know that our students are easily adaptable and the quickest learners, which will in turn yield much less of a time commitment to training and supervision than they might think."

De Grauwe, Payne Cuffy and Papadakos all agree that one thing that sets Durham Region's post-secondary experiential learning opportunities apart is how new they are. Ontario Tech opened in 2003, Trent University Durham GTA in 2010 and Durham College just started offering co-op opportunities in 2017. "That allows us to be industry-responsive and innovative in the programs that we offer," says Payne Cuffy. "We do take an approach where we are really collaborative with our employer partners, just really trying to be as immersive as possible [with experiential learning opportunities]. And making sure our programs are closely aligned with labour market needs."