

# **Best Practices in Supporting International Students Enrolled in Toronto-area Colleges**



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## **BACKGROUND**

### **About the ICE Committee**

The ICE Committee was established in 1997 by officials from the Government of Canada, the Province of Ontario, and the City of Toronto, to share information and coordinate public sector efforts to support economic and labour force development in the broader Toronto area, as well as to sponsor relevant research studies. Membership in ICE includes representatives from: FedDev Ontario; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada; Service Canada; the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services; the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities; the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade; the Ontario Ministry of Finance; the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development; the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing; the Toronto Economic Development and Culture Division; the Toronto Employment and Social Services Division; and the Toronto Social Development, Finance and Administration Division. For more information, see: [www.icecommittee.org](http://www.icecommittee.org).

### **Author**

Marshia Akbar is a Research Area Lead on Labor Migration at Toronto Metropolitan University's Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in Migration and Integration Program. Her research examines the labor market integration and inclusion of immigrants and migrants with temporary status in Canada from an intersectionality perspective. Currently, she is researching the transition and labor market integration of international students in Canada. In June 2022, she was awarded the Insight Development Grants by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to fund her study on international students.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Canadian colleges have experienced a major increase in international student enrollments in recent years. The growth in the number of international students is most pronounced in Ontario, which is the only province in Canada where more international students have been enrolling in colleges than universities since the 2018/19 academic year. Colleges in Ontario are, thus, playing increasing roles in shaping education migration pathway, educating future labour force, and shaping internationalization policies and practices in Canada. However, there are growing concerns about the social and economic challenges facing international students and the roles of colleges in addressing these issues and supporting international students.

Within this recent context, this study is a timely effort to produce theoretical and empirical insights into the barriers international college students face while transitioning from study to work and temporary to permanent status. The study aims to achieve three objectives: to understand the challenges and needs of international students enrolled in Toronto-area colleges, to learn about the policies and programs of colleges to support international students and to provide recommendations to enhance the service infrastructure for international students.

### **Research Undertaken**

This study focuses on six public colleges that have main campuses in the Greater Toronto Area and that have been providing diplomas/degrees to international students since the 1960s. Both secondary and primary data are collected through literature review and interviews, respectively, and analyzed to understand existing knowledge on international college students, lived experiences of students and graduates, and expert views and assessments. The findings of the study demonstrate that students need a wide range of support and services for accessing reliable information, academic and social integration, labour market integration, transitioning to permanent status and discrimination and mental health issues. However, they get very little support from the colleges as well as from the government.

### **Recommendations**

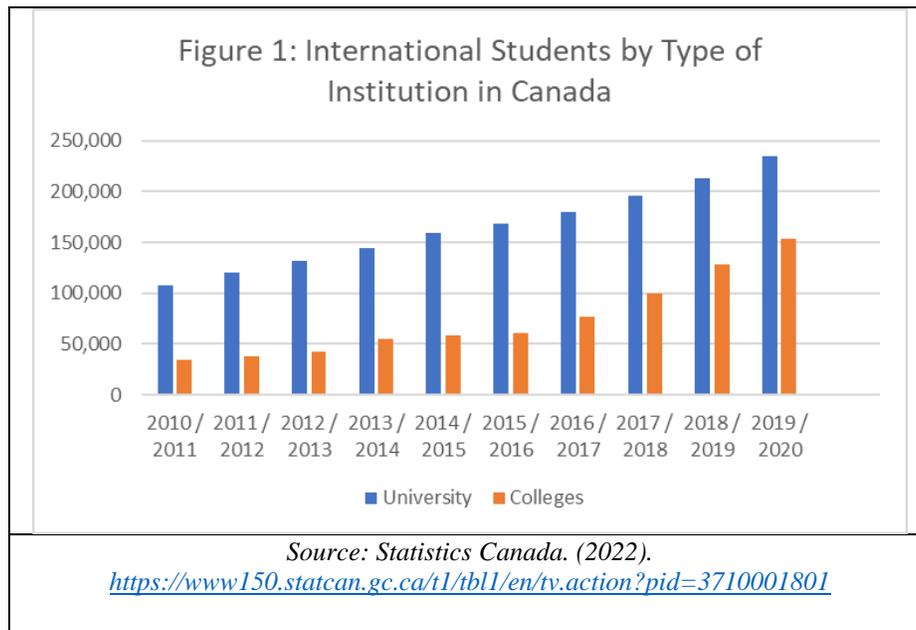
Drawing on the views of various stakeholders and international students, the study suggests a collaborative service delivery model, a collaborative partnership between public colleges, federal and provincial governments, and settlement organizations, as an effective strategy to develop a sustainable service infrastructure for international college students in GTA. The study also provides specific recommendations on:

- Addressing structural gaps
- Changing recruitment strategies
- Replacing business model with an equity model
- Addressing information gaps
- Mending policy gaps
- Mending service gaps
- Developing targeted services

The study suggests that international students need greater support from colleges, service providers, communities, and all levels of government during and after their studies in Canada, and as they seek employment and permanent Canadian residence. Since the current federal government wants to maintain high levels of immigration to address labour shortage and the international student strategy aims to make them a major source of talent in Canada, supporting their integration will help the government achieve its own policy objectives. Supporting international college students' transition and integration is not only a win-win situation for Canada but also essential for safeguarding Canada's reputation as one of the best destinations in the world for higher education.

## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Canadian policies have been designed to encourage growth in the number of international students given that their Canadian education, work experience and proficiency in English/French, make them potentially a vital source of highly skilled workers and future permanent residents (Arthur 2017)<sup>1</sup>. International students currently comprise one of the largest temporary migrant groups in Canada. Their enrollment in Canadian post secondary institutions has been rising since the mid-2000's. According to Galway (2000)<sup>2</sup>, the top three reasons that institutions of higher education recruit international students are to generate revenue, to bring foreign perspectives to the local student body, and to foster international trade links. In 2022, there were 807,750 international students, across all study levels, who had study permits in Canada, which grew by 31.0% compared to 617,000 students in 2021 ([ICEF Monitor 2023](#)). Between 2000 and 2022, their number significantly increased by more than 400%. Although most (60.5%) international students in higher education were enrolled in universities in 2019/2020, the proportion studying in colleges (39.5%) has been on the rise (Figure 1) ([Statistics Canada 2021](#)).

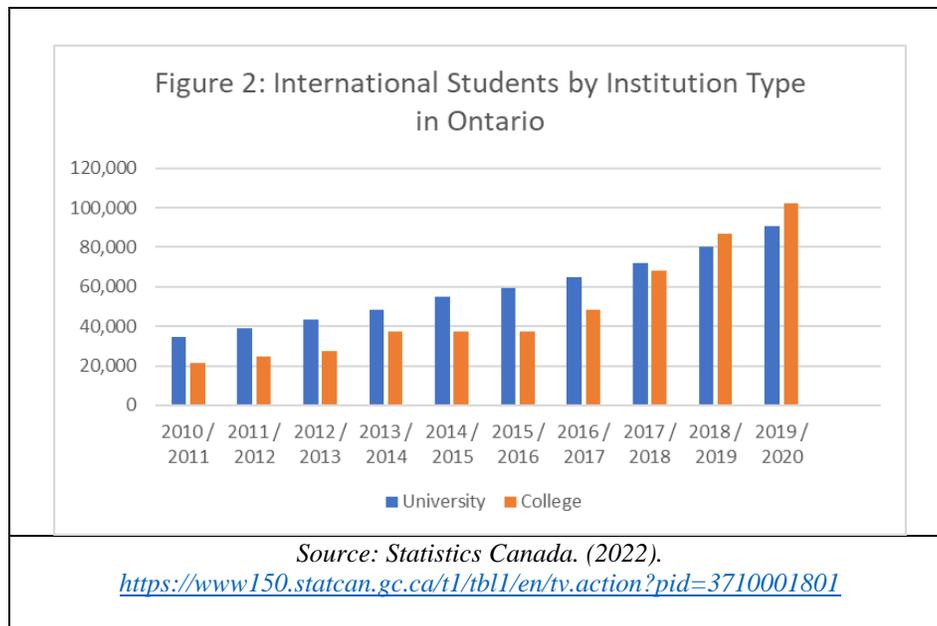


Canadian colleges have experienced a major increase in international student enrollments. International enrollments in the colleges grew faster than those of universities. Between 2014 and 2018, study permit applications for international students planning to attend a Canadian college

<sup>1</sup> Arthur, N. (2017). Supporting international students through strengthening their social resources. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(5), 887-894.

<sup>2</sup> Galway, A. D. (2000). *Going global, Ontario colleges of applied arts and technology, international student recruitment and the export of education* (Doctoral dissertation).

grew by 319% ([College and Institutes Canada 2021](#)). Between 2010/2011 and 2019/2020, there was more than a four-fold increase in the number of international students in colleges, from 34,653 to 153,693 ([Statistics Canada 2022](#)). International students at the college level also saw the greatest growth in labor market involvement, rising from 7% in 2000 to 57% in 2018 ([Canada International Student Statistics 2022](#)). The growth in the number of international students was most pronounced in Ontario and British Columbia ([Statistics Canada 2022](#)). Ontario is the only province in Canada where more international students have been enrolling in colleges than universities since the 2018/19 academic year and more than half of Ontario’s international students (52%) enrolled in colleges in Ontario in 2020/21 (Figure 2).



Colleges in Ontario are, thus, playing increasing roles in shaping education migration pathway, educating future labour force, and shaping internationalization policies and practices in Canada. However, there are growing concerns about the social and economic challenges facing international students and the roles of colleges in addressing these issues and supporting international students. International students’ temporary status and their lack of access to services make them one of the most vulnerable migrant groups in Canada. The COVID-19 pandemic hit them particularly hard, intensifying existing challenges and creating new ones related to job loss, reduced income, social isolation and lack of adequate health care and social support ([Government of Canada 2021](#); [Varughese & Schwartz 2022](#)). Amid the pandemic, many academics and policy makers have drawn their attention to address the challenges facing international students, particularly in the college sector.

This attention has been intensified after the release of CBC’s The Fifth Estate Series: [Sold a Lie 2022](#) and news reports such as [Here’s what international students say about their experience in Canada](#), published in the [Toronto Star](#), which captured international college students’ challenging journey: deception and false promises from the recruitment agencies, lack of support from the colleges, financial difficulties due to high and ever-increasing tuition fees, and barriers to employment during study and after graduation. The recent social media campaign, [Need or Greed](#),

by Ontario college students to reduce international tuition fees and obtain access to services also caught attention of many policy makers, researchers, and practitioners. They emphasize the urgent need for examining how international students obtain college admission, experience academic adjustment, access social and employment services, the challenges that they face during study and after graduation and the support they need to overcome those challenges.

Within this recent context, this study is a timely effort to produce theoretical and empirical insights into the barriers and opportunities international college students face while transitioning from study to work and temporary to permanent status. This study will contribute to understanding how their social and economic integration can be facilitated through more effective roles of the public colleges and relevant stakeholders (such as government and settlement sectors) and through designing and delivering appropriate services and support programs. Examining their study-to-work transition challenges and access to services is also essential to address Toronto's labour market processes and the growing labour shortages, particularly during the post-pandemic recovery period.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

The main goal of this study is to address a broad question: what are the best practices in supporting international college students in Toronto? Through addressing the question, the study aims to achieve three objectives:

- To understand the challenges and needs of international college students enrolled in Toronto-area colleges.
- To learn about the policies and programs of colleges to support international students.
- To provide recommendations to enhance the support infrastructure for international students.

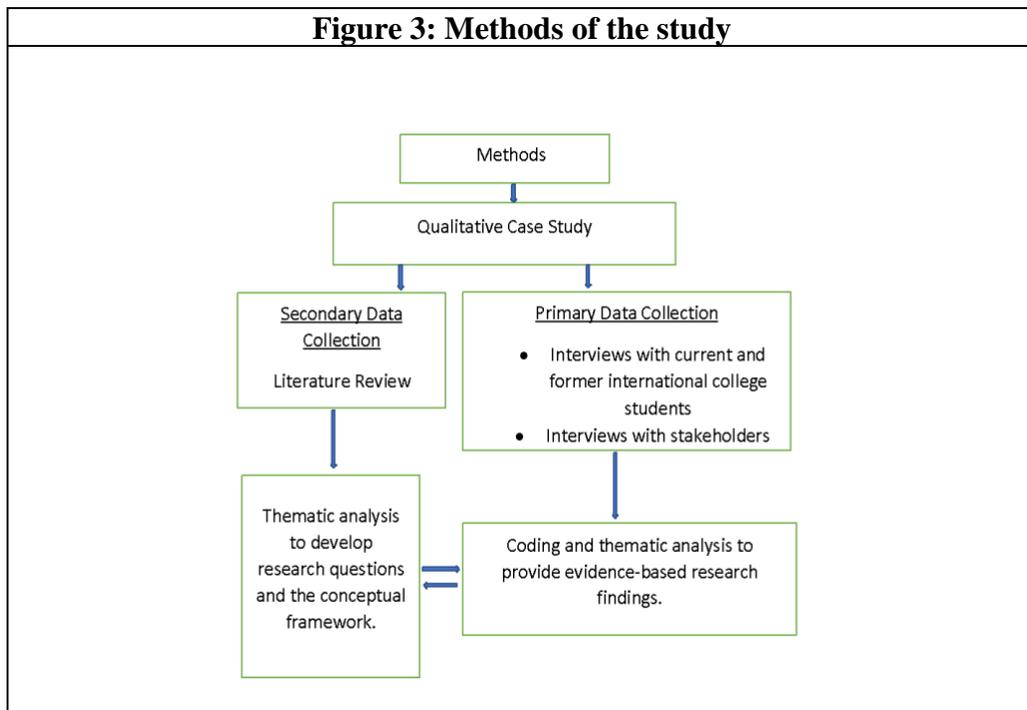
### **1.2 Scope of the Study**

There are 24 public colleges in Ontario under the umbrella of Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT), which was established in 1966. Most colleges under the CAAT also were established in the 1960s ([Government of Ontario 2022](#)). Among those, the main campuses of 6 colleges are located in the GTA. In addition, a few public and public-private partnership colleges have recently opened their branches in the GTA (such as Algonquin College, Fleming College, & Collège Boréal). There are also more than 500 private career colleges in Ontario (Auditor General of Ontario [2021](#)). In 2020/2021, a total of 104,937 international students enrolled in public colleges ([Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2021](#)). Toronto dominates in admitting international college students. In 2021, Toronto colleges represented almost half (47.8%) of the total international students in all 24 Ontario public colleges ([Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2021](#)). There is no specific reliable data on the enrollment of international students in private colleges. This study will focus on the following 6 public colleges that have main campuses in the GTA and that have been providing diplomas/degrees to international students for a long period of time, since the 1960s (Table 1).

Table 1: Selected Colleges for the Study	
Selected Colleges	Year of Establishment
Centennial College	1966
George Brown College	1966
Humber College	1967
Seneca College	1967
Sheridan College	1967
Durham College	1967

## SECTION 2: METHODS

To identify the best practices in supporting international college students, the study has adopted a qualitative case study approach focusing on publicly funded colleges located in the GTA area. Both primary and secondary data and information are collected and analyzed to understand existing knowledge on international college students, lived experiences of students and graduates, and expert views and assessments (Figure 3).



## **2.1 Literature Review**

In depth literature review was conducted to collect and analyze secondary information. Literature search was conducted in three phases:

First Phase: Using the ‘Google’, ‘Google Scholar’ and ‘Toronto Metropolitan University library’ search engines, three phrases are used to search literature: international students in Canada, international college students in Canada, international college students in Toronto. Among hundreds of listings, relevant publications were selected for the study after reading the abstract and/or the main themes of the papers.

Second Phase: In this phase, the same search engines were used to find literature on more specific topics using key words and phrases, such as international students and COVID-19 in Canada, international students and tuition fees in Canada, recruitment agencies and Canadian colleges, service needs of international students in Canadian colleges, and internationalization in public colleges in Canada. Through this round of search, additional journal articles, research reports, policy papers, news reports and social media posts are added to the list.

Third phase: Several additional literature sources are selected from the reference list of the publications selected in the first two phases. Some more sources are added during primary data collection and writing stages.

Overall, most publications selected for reviewing were published after 2000. The debates on policies, practices and challenges related to international students became important in Canada after 2000 (particularly since the mid-2000s) when their numbers started to rise significantly. Thus, the timeline of the selected publications is appropriate to capture the key discussions on international students in Canada. However, a few journal articles published in the 1990s are also included to capture the historical trends in the admission and integration of international students in Canada. The total number of sources selected for reviewing is 255.

The literature on international students is disproportionately focused on university students in Canada, even though about 40% international students in Canada and above 50% international students in Ontario, the largest destination province for international students, attend colleges. Only 60 out of 255 selected literature sources discussed international college students and issues related to internationalization policies, service provision and service needs, and the challenges facing international students in the college sector. These 60 sources include 25 peer reviewed articles, 21 research and policy reports, and 14 news and social media reports including a CBC documentary. A thematic content analysis was conducted to identify the key themes and debates related to international students, particularly international college students in Ontario. The themes are discussed in Section 3.

## **2.2 Interviews with Students**

In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen current and former international college students who were studying in/graduated from the selected six public colleges at the time of interview (Table 2). The interviews took place virtually via Zoom between December 2022 and February 2023 (3 months). Various networks (international student offices at the selected colleges, international student organizations, community organizations, settlement service providers) and social media platforms (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter) were used to recruit participants for the study.

The ethical guidelines provided by the [Tri-Council Policy Statement 2018](#) (TCPS) were strictly maintained to ensure confidentiality of the research participants' identities and personal information. The study received an ethics certificate from Toronto Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Board (REB).<sup>3</sup> The participants are fully anonymous in the report. The interviews were conducted after obtaining consent from the participants and they were given the rights to withdraw their participation at any moment during and after the interview. The published report on this study will be shared with the participants so that they can actively take part in knowledge dissemination and awareness building.

<b>Table 2: Interview Participants from the Selected Colleges</b>	
<b>Selected Colleges</b>	<b>No. of Participants</b>
Centennial College	1
George Brown College	6
Humber College	4
Seneca College	3
Sheridan College	2
Durham College	2
Total	18

### **2.2.1 Interview Guide for Students**

An interview guide consisting of a set of questions under seven broad themes was prepared to conduct the interviews (Table 3). The seven themes include: demographic information, migration history, educational and professional background, employment experience in Canada, impacts of COVID-19, transition to permanent status, and service needs. Questions related to these themes provided the scope to understand students' specific challenges, service needs and complex trajectories of transition from study to work and temporary to permanent status.

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<sup>3</sup> The researcher received ethics clearance from TMU's Research Ethics Board for conducting a two-year long project on study to work transition of international students, which was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The ethics certificate covered this ICE project due to having shared research objectives and participants.

**Table 3: Interview Guide for International College Students**

Section I: Demographic Information

1. How old are you? Please specify in years.
2. What is your country of birth?
3. Is your country of birth and the country of your citizenship the same?  
*Probe: If no, what is the country of your citizenship?*
4. Do you have Permanent Residence (PR) in another country than the country of citizenship?  
*Probe: If yes, what is the country of your Permanent Residence?*
5. How would you like to identify yourself in terms of your gender?  
*Probe: Man; Woman; Non-Binary; Gender-Fluid; Agender; Prefer not to disclose; Prefer to specify:*
6. Which religion do you identify yourself most close to?  
*Probe: Hindu; Muslim; Christian; Sikh; Buddhist; Atheist; Agnostic; Secular; Prefer not to disclose; Other, specify:*
7. What is your marital status?  
*Probe: Single; Married or civil partnership; Widowed; Divorced; Separated; Prefer not to disclose*
8. Do you have any children?  
*Probe: If yes, how many children do you have?*

Section II: Migration History

9. When did you come to Canada?
10. Under which visa category did you initially move to Canada?
11. Has your visa category changed since you moved to Canada?  
*Probe: If yes, can you please elaborate on the changes in your visa categories.*
12. What are the factors that motivated you to come to Canada to study, and not another country?
13. Did you take any assistance from a recruitment/education agency to come to get admission in a Canadian college? What kind of support did they provide you during your admission and visa processing period?

Section III: Educational and Professional Background

14. What is the highest educational degree that you have completed?  
*Probe: From which country and university/college did you complete your degree? What was your area of specialization?*
15. Did you have any previous work experience(s) before coming to Canada?  
*Probe: If yes, can you please elaborate on your work experience(s)? For example: in which sector did you work? For how long did you work? In which country did you work?*

#### Section IV: Employment Experience in Canada

16. Can you please elaborate on your experience of working in Canada?

*Probe: Are you currently working? If yes, in which sector do you work? How did you find out about your current work? Are you satisfied with the job that you are doing now? If not, what kind of job would you like to do? What do you think of the working environment in your current workplace? What sorts of challenges have you faced in your workplace, if any?*

*If not, is there any reason for not working? Do you think that it is difficult to find employment related to one's educational qualifications in Canada? Please elaborate. What strategies have you employed to find a job so far?*

17. What was your experience in adjusting with the academic institution in Canada? Do you feel included in the classroom, on campus or in the college in general? Do you think your academic degree will help you get a job after graduation?

18. Recently the government has lifted the 20-hour work limit for international students during academic terms. What is your reaction to this decision? Would this help you take on multiple jobs? Would it affect students' work and study balance? If so, what are your suggestions to address this issue?

19. Do you think that your temporary visa status affected your employment opportunities in Canada? Please elaborate.

#### Section V: Impacts of COVID 19

20. Did COVID 19 impact your life in Canada? Please elaborate.

*Probe: How did the border closure and the delays in the immigration processing times affect you? How does it feel to stay away from your family during the COVID 19 pandemic? How did the COVID 19 pandemic impact your studies/work?*

21. Do you feel that you are in a more vulnerable position in your work (or while you search for a job) due to COVID? Please elaborate.

#### Section VI: Transition to Permanent Status

22. Do you know if and what opportunities exist for international students and international graduates to obtain permanent residency in Canada? Please elaborate.

23. In your opinion, what sorts of challenges international students, and international graduates face to obtain permanent status in Canada?

24. What advice would you give to the Canadian policymakers with regards to the transition of highly skilled temporary migrants to permanent status?

#### Section VII: Service Needs

25. Is there any employment support for international students in your institution? Explain what kind of support you received. What kind of support is still needed on campus to support the employment opportunities of international students?

26. How do you get information on available services in your institution? Do representatives from the International Student Office contact you personally or via other mediums to inform you about available services?
27. Have you used any services provided by the college after coming to Canada? If so, how was your experience? Do you think colleges should provide more services to students? Explain what kind of services students need for their integration?
28. Thank you so much for your time and valuable feedback. Is there anything else you would like to add?

### **2.2.2 Characteristics of International Students**

International students attending Toronto colleges often possess distinct social characteristics that shape their overall social and economic integration. Analyzing the Students Satisfaction Survey (SSS) over the 2011/2012 to 2014/2015 period, Decock et al. (2016) compared the characteristics of the international students and domestic students who attended in the Toronto colleges. They found that international students are older than domestic students. Most international students were in the 21–25 and 26–30 age categories, whereas most of their domestic counterparts were in the 16-21 age category. Older age reflects the prior academic qualifications of international students enrolled in Toronto colleges. Almost half (49.6%) of the international students in Toronto colleges had completed a university degree compared to only 18.4% of domestic students. Analyzing the Graduate Student Survey, Decock et al. (2016) also found that international students are primarily using college as a second credential to pursue personal or career development and not as a stepping-stone to university. In contrast, many domestic students obtain college education as a preparation for further education.

The participants in this study share some common characteristics with those identified by Decock et al. (2016). For instance, most of the participants (10 out of 18) were mature students in their 30s at the time of the interviews and all of them had obtained post-secondary education in their country of origin prior to coming to Canada to study at a college (Table 3). Of the participants, 11 had completed a Bachelor's degree, 5 had completed a Master's degree, and 2 held double Master's degrees. While some of these students pursued college education to advance their career prospects, most of them enrolled in college education with the primary goal of immigrating to Canada. This topic is further discussed in Section 3.

Although Decock et al. (2016) found that international students in Toronto colleges were more likely to be male-dominated, this study's participant group is female-dominated, with 12 out of 18 participants being female international students. This study adds to Decock et al.'s findings by exploring the specific experiences of female students, their reasons for enrolling in college programs, their employment and transition experiences, and their service needs.

**Table 4: Demographic and Social Characteristics of International Students**

Age	Ranges from 22 to 40 (10 out of 18 are in their 30s).
Gender	Female dominated study so far (12 out of 18 are women).
Marital status	Diverse marital status (5 married, 12 single & 1 common law).
Children	Only 3 have children, so the majority do not have childcare responsibilities.
Country of origin	Diverse countries of origin that include (India, Bangladesh, Iran, Philippines, Honduras, Columbia, Uganda, Egypt, UK, Turkey, Mexico, Chile, and France).
Migration history	Arrived in Canada with a study permit between 2018 and 2021. - 11 came during pre-pandemic time (between 2018 and 2019). - 7 came after the peak of the pandemic in 2021.
Current immigration status	- 2 hold a post graduate work permit. - 3 have implied status (waiting for the PGWP). - 13 hold study permits.
Education gained from the country of origin	- 7 have Master's degrees (2 hold double Master's degrees). - 11 have a bachelor degree.
Employment status in Canada	- 4 are unemployed. - 14 are employed. - Out of 14, 12 work part-time.

The previous study by Decock et al. (2016) also found that a significant proportion of international students (72%) in Toronto area colleges did not work for pay, compared to 45.9% of domestic students. This lack of work experience may have made it difficult for international students to integrate into the Canadian labour market. However, in the current study, most participants (14 out of 18) who were students or Post Graduate Work Permit (PGWP)<sup>4</sup> holders were working at the time of the interview, with the majority holding part-time jobs. This is understandable given that study permit holders need to balance their studies and work during their time in Canada. However, as most of these jobs are in the low-skill/low-wage sector, the work experience they acquire often does not provide them with any benefit in terms of finding employment in their field of study after graduation. Additionally, the participants face a wide range of challenges in the labour market, which are discussed in Section 3.

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<sup>4</sup> Post Graduate Work Permit (PGWP), which started in 2003 as a pilot program in selected provinces and expanded nationwide in 2005, allows international students to stay and work in Canada up to three years with an open work permit after graduation ([Government of Canada 2022](#)).

The student participants in this study are recent migrants who came to Canada with a study permit between 2018 and 2021. They are from diverse countries of four continents (Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe) and possess diverse ethno-cultural and religious backgrounds. Having this diverse sample helped understand the relations between their social characteristics, academic experiences, labour market integration, immigration process and service needs to navigate all these aspects.

### 2.3 Interviews with Stakeholders

Interviews with ten stakeholders/experts were conducted to engage them in-depth conversations about the challenges that international students face when studying in public colleges in the GTA, the roles of stakeholders, and policy recommendations.

<b>Table 5: Interviews with Stakeholders</b>	
<b>Sector</b>	<b>No. of Participants</b>
Settlement Service Providers	2
Non-for-profit Organizations	2
Educational Institutions	2
Federal government & Provincial Governments	2
Community Organizations	1
Lawyers Association & Consultancies (Immigration lawyer)	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

The stakeholders include practitioners in the college sector who work directly with international students, policy makers, settlement service providers, immigration consultants, and representatives from international students’ organizations and community organizations (Table 5). The experts were selected based on their key roles in the field of education, migration, and integration. Like students who participated in the study, the stakeholders will also remain completely anonymous in the report. All required ethical guidelines (explained in the previous section) were followed during interviews with selected stakeholders. The stakeholders are selected from the following organizations:

- Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE).
- World Education Services (WES)
- COSTI Immigration Services
- ACCES Employment
- Seneca College
- George Brown College
- Business Immigration Law Group

- Ministry of Colleges and Universities
- Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration
- Punjabi Community Health Services in Greater Toronto Area

### 2.3.1 Interview Guide for Stakeholders

The stakeholder interviews aimed to explore the available services and support programs for international students at the chosen public colleges, identify challenges associated with service provision and delivery, and propose recommendations to enhance students' academic, social, and labor market integration. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the service provision and need, the interview questions were organized into six sections: academic support, employment support, social support, immigration support, accountability in recruitment and collaboration for service delivery (Table 6). These themes generated very rich information and diverse views, ideas, and recommendations from the stakeholders from various key institutions.

**Table 6: Interview Guide for Stakeholders**

#### **Introductory Question**

1. Can you please explain how important is the admission of international students for the public colleges in Canada? How are they contributing to your institution?

#### **Academic Support**

2. What are the major challenges international students face while adjusting with the academic/campus environment in the public colleges?
3. What kind of support do you provide them to overcome those challenges? What additional initiatives do you think would help them improve their academic performance?

#### **Employment Support**

4. Many international students face difficulties to find a well paid/skilled job after graduation. What kind of support do you provide to assist their transition from college to labour market? Please elaborate.

*Probe: Can you please give some examples of the support for students such as internship or co-op opportunities, career fair, language training, and employment training?*

5. What roles does the international students' office play to provide these services? What kind of additional support and services do you think is needed for them? Please elaborate.
6. What type of challenges or limitations public colleges face to facilitate employment support for international students? What kind assistance/support is needed to improve your services?
7. Do you think that public colleges should collaborate with the settlement organizations to develop a better employment support structure for international students? Please elaborate.

### **Support for Transition/Immigration**

8. How can public colleges provide information and services to assist international students' transition to permanent status?

### **Social Support**

9. Do you think that there is a need for programs or resources to address the mental health issues, food insecurity, discrimination and other social challenges facing international students attending in public colleges?

*Probe: If yes, what kind of programs and resources do you think are needed?*

### **Accountability in Recruitment**

10. Recently, a CBC documentary and various news and social media reports have highlighted how recruitment agencies often offer false promises to international students regarding their admission, academic life, employment, and permanent residency in Canada.

What is your reaction to the roles of recruitment agencies? How can public colleges monitor and ensure the accountability of the recruitment agencies?

### **Collaboration**

11. Do you think that the government should have more involvement in service provision and labour market integration of international students? If so, how can the federal/provincial government partner with which public colleges to develop a collaborative approach to support international students?
12. What kind of roles the settlement organizations can play in providing services to international students? Do you think international students need the same services that are designed for other newcomers? If not, what steps should the settlement organizations take to customize their services for international students attending colleges?
13. What are your views on a collaborative approach between the government, public colleges and the settlement organizations? Would this be an efficient model for supporting international students? Explain why and how?

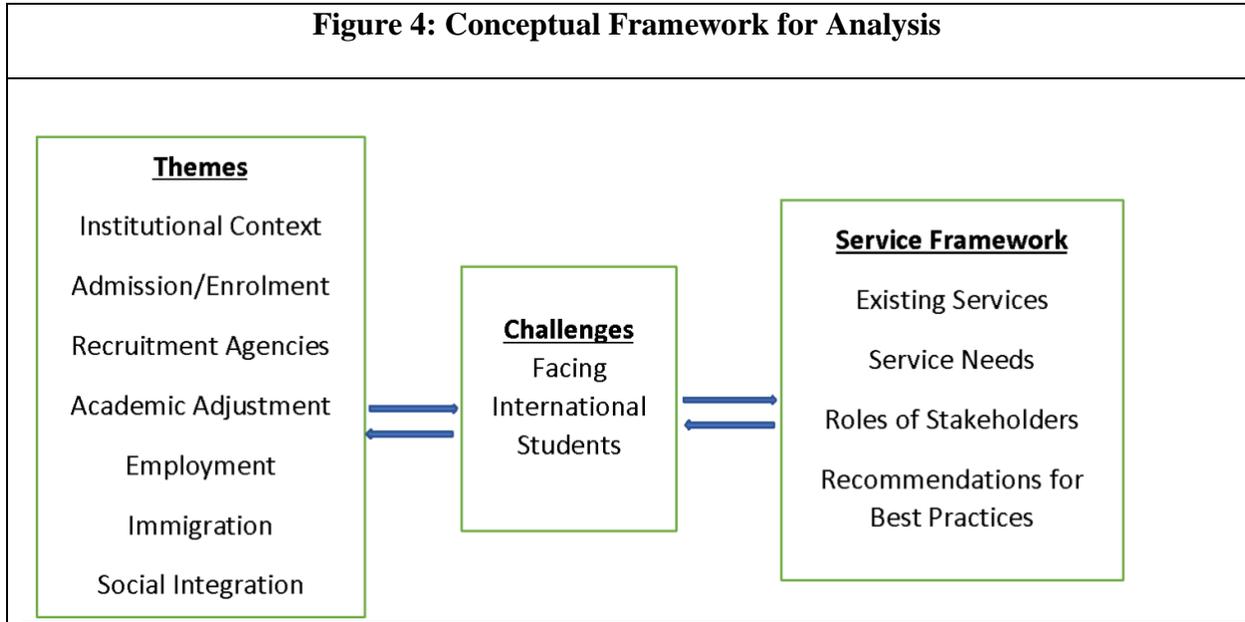
### **Concluding Question**

14. Thank you so much for your time and valuable feedback. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## **2.4 Analysis: Conceptual Framework**

Information collected through literature review, and interviews (with international students and graduates from six public colleges and ten stakeholders) was analyzed using a conceptual framework comprising three interconnected parts (Figure 4). The first part is focused on seven themes that shape the enrollment of international college students, and their transition from study to work and temporary to permanent status in Canada. These themes that include institutional

context, admission, recruitment agencies, academic adjustment, employment, social integration, and immigration were chosen based on the narratives of the interview participants as well as from the findings of the literature review.



The second part involves the challenges students face in relation to those seven themes. In this part, existing literature is analyzed as well as the opinions and views of the interviewed students and stakeholders.

Finally, the last part of analysis emphasizes the service and support structure for international students in the public colleges in the GTA. The discussion highlights the service needs and existing services for students in relation to the seven themes discussed above, the roles that different stakeholders play to provide and enhance services, and their recommendations for the best and effective practices related to service provision and delivery.

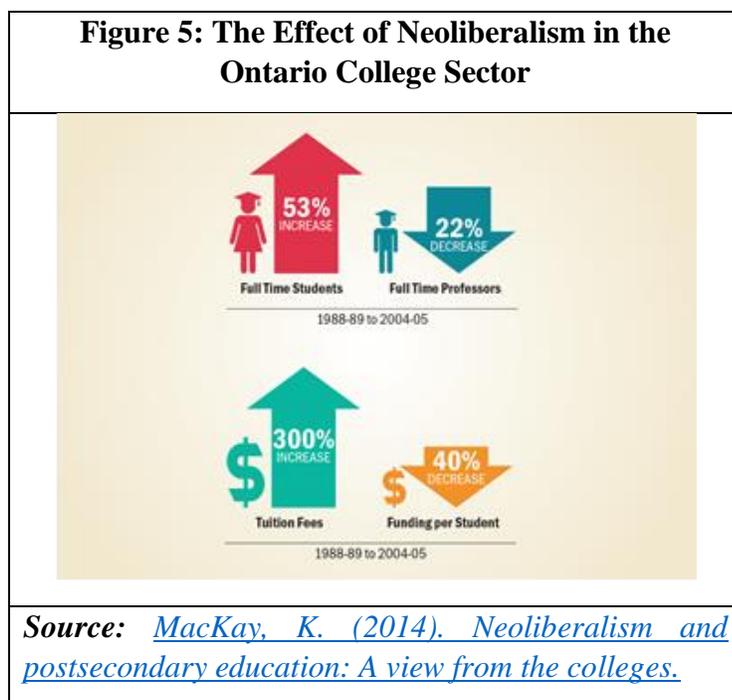
The conceptual framework with these three interconnected parts provides a guideline to organize the rich interview data, reflect on the existing debates outlined in the literature as well as define the scope of the analysis focusing on the objectives of the study. Discussing literature review, and the narratives of international college students and stakeholders under each theme, the analysis brings together the emerging debates, policy perspectives and experiential views to inform the implications of policies and practices related to service provision.

## SECTION 3: ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES

### 3.1 Institutional Context

#### 3.1.1 Cut in Public Funding

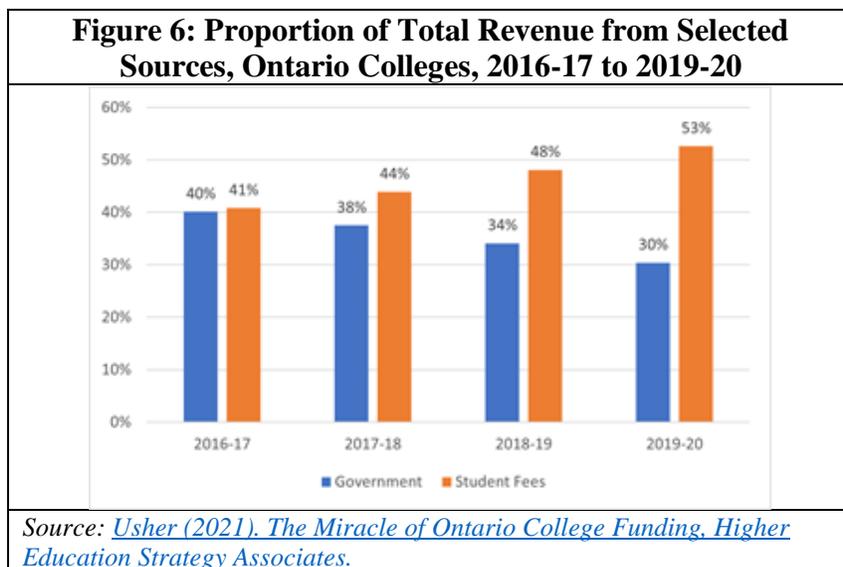
With the prevalence of a neoliberal political ideology in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, which emphasized privatization, corporate organization, internationalization and inter-institutional competition in the education sector, the Ontario colleges experienced steady cuts in public funding (Figure 5).



In 1966, when the CAATs in Ontario were established, about three-quarters (75%) of funding was provided by the provincial government through the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU), and the Ministry of Skills Development (MSD). Student fees accounted for only 10%-15% of total revenues ([Mackay 2014](#)). Since then, provincial funding for Ontario public colleges declined continuously. In 2005, Ontario public colleges got 40% less funding per student compared to that in 1988-89. In the 2008/2009 academic year, 28.2% of revenues in Ontario public colleges came from student fees, while public funding accounted for over half (54.4%). But these figures had almost reversed by 2019/2020 when student fees accounted for over half (53%) of all college revenues in 2019/2020, while public funding decreased to 30% ([Statistics Canada 2022](#)). Currently, public funding in Ontario for colleges is the lowest among all the provinces.

Ontario colleges have also experienced a decline in domestic student enrollment since 2012/13. Between 2012/13 and 2020/21, public colleges in Ontario experienced a 15% decline in domestic student enrollments mainly due to a change in the demographics of Ontario's population, and high school graduates pursuing university over college education (Auditor General of Ontario [2021](#)).

During the same period, international student enrollment grew by 342%. A vast majority of international students in 2020/21 came from India (62%), followed by China (6%) and Vietnam (4%). Linda Franklin, former president and CEO of Colleges Ontario, “noted that the colleges had turned to international students to make up for declining provincial funding and the drop in the number of domestic students, and that the colleges were overly reliant on one country’s [India] expatriate students” (Greenfield 2021). In a nutshell, the dropping enrollment of domestic students and low government support have influenced Ontario colleges to turn to an international market, particularly an Indian market, for revenue generation. However, rather than just supplementing the numbers of domestic students, the colleges are focused on continuous growth in international enrollment, overlooking their capacity to sustain the increasing number of students. Many colleges have adopted this growth-oriented model not only to generate essential revenues but also to enhance their net assets through international tuition fees (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2021).



### 3.1.2 Dependence on International Tuition Fees

The neoliberal trend related to funding cuts has shifted the burden of college education from tax revenues to tuition fees paid by students, particularly international students. According to the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2021), in the 2020/2021 academic year, international students enrolled in Ontario colleges paid \$14,306 on average (more than three times higher), compared to \$3,228 per domestic student. This represented an 8% increase from the average fees charged to international students in 2018/19. While making up only 30% of the student population in Ontario's 24 public colleges, international students provided 68% of tuition revenue. Their fees alone were worth \$1.7 billion, more than colleges received in provincial grants in 2020/2021.

Despite funding cuts, public colleges’ collective net assets (assets remaining after their liabilities) increased \$1.22 billion (62%) between 2016/17 and 2020/2021 mainly due to a significant reliance on international student enrollment (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2021). Between 2018/19 and 2019/2020, Ontario colleges’ average surplus was 6.1% of revenues, but it was over

10% at La Cité, St. Clair, Lambton colleges and over 25% at Northern College ([Usher 2021](#)). This monetary benefit has primarily resulted from the enrollment of international students. In 2017/18, for the first time, international student tuition revenue exceeded domestic student tuition revenue. Ontario public colleges desperately need to enroll international students to sustain administrative and capital expenditures and costs of educating domestic students.

Ontario colleges' reliance on international students has consequences. It makes colleges more oriented to a market driven approach (which is discussed in the next section) and less oriented to public service, equity, and equality-oriented education approaches. The neoliberal structural vision has also led to increased class size, decreased services, relying on part-time faculties, relying on recruitment agencies, admission of lower quality international students and lower quality education. This neoliberal trend will likely continue in the coming years as the budget 2022 includes over a \$1 billion cut to OSAP and student financial assistance than what was available to students in 2018-2019. "It shows that on top of previous cuts, the government will spend \$685 million less on Post-Secondary Education in 2021-22 than it had planned in previous budgets" ([CFS Ontario 2022](#)). The decrease in public funding for post secondary education will put more pressure on colleges to rely on international tuition fees.

## **3.2 Admission/Enrollment**

### **3.2.1 Emergence of a Business Model**

Originally, the goal of the Ontario public colleges was to serve members of the local community that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education and prepare them for local labour markets (Levin 2001)<sup>5</sup>. The dependency on international students influenced colleges to shift their focus from providing vocationally oriented training and education to local people, to attracting foreign students. Buckner et al. (2022)<sup>6</sup> analyzed policy documents (i.e., strategies, plans, and white papers) from eleven Canadian colleges published between 2011 and 2020 from five provinces (Ontario, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Nova Scotia). Five of the eleven strategies were from Ontario colleges. After analyzing the themes of the strategic documents, they found that "colleges justify their focus on international student recruitment by framing international students as promoting the development of intercultural awareness and global competences of domestic students, which are framed as increasingly necessary for their labor market success".

Colleges also link recruitment of international students explicitly to revenue generation to benefit domestic students and their labor market success. So, international students are constructed an essential component for the overall success of the domestic students, while the goals and aspirations of international students are treated as a secondary aspect (Buckner et al. 2021)<sup>7</sup>. Within this business model, service provision is framed from the lens of international students' deficiencies without considering their vulnerabilities due to their temporary visa status and limited social and legal rights in Canada. Most of the services are designed to ensure their retention, rather

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<sup>5</sup> Levin, J. S. (2001). Public policy, community colleges, and the path to globalization. *Higher Education*, 42, 237-262.

<sup>6</sup> Buckner, E., Brown, T., & Morales, S. (2022). Local Mandate, Global Market: How Canadian Colleges Discuss International Students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 1-15.

<sup>7</sup> Buckner, E., Morales, S., Brown, T., & Clerk, S. (2021). Trends in International Student Enrollments in Canadian Community Colleges. In *International Students at US Community Colleges* (pp. 203-214). Routledge.

than on the institutional commitment to their success and wellbeing. According to Buckner et al. (2022), the strategic interest of Canadian colleges in terms of revenue generation and the symbolic interest in terms of commitments to diversity and intercultural awareness conjointly shape their internationalization policy. While achieving these dual interests, the colleges often overlook the needs and wellbeing of international students.

To attract international students, many colleges highlight immigration pathways for students in their marketing strategies, often via recruitment agencies (Buckner et al. 2022; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2021; [One Voice Canada 2021](#)). Colleges often use catchy slogans, such as ‘Study in Canada-Pathway to immigration’ to advertise academic programs. The prospect of an immigration visa motivates many families in India, China and other countries to send their youth to Canadian colleges as a way of establishing a foothold in Canada for opportunities, security and freedom ([Qadeer 2022](#)). Several studies found that international student recruitment is closely related to immigration in Canada ([Sá and Sabzalieva 2018](#)) and that permanent residency in Canada is a primary goal of many international college students (Jafar and Legusov 2021). While colleges use immigration as a strategy to enroll international students, facilitating students’ transition from temporary to permanent status is barely mentioned in their internationalization policy (Buckner et al. 2022).

### **3.2.2 Immigration as a Motivating Factor**

The immigration focused marketing strategy of the colleges reflects the motivations of many prospective international students. Previous studies suggest that immigrating to Canada is often the main reason why students pursue college education in Canada (Buckner et al. 2022, 2021). Most participants in this study (16 out of 18) also confirmed this tendency. They saw college admission as the first step towards obtaining Canadian permanent residency. Many found the direct permanent residency pathway difficult and time consuming and some of them could not secure enough points through the Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS)<sup>8</sup> to apply through the Express Entry<sup>9</sup> system. Getting an admission to a college certificate course was the easiest way for them to enter Canada and have a better and secure life compared to what they were experiencing in their home country. Participant ‘C’ who is studying Project Management at Humber College explains:

*“After getting my Master’s Degree in International Relations and working for two and a half years in Turkey, I really wanted to change my life. I did not like the political situation there, there was no hope. I got fed-up. So, I was looking for opportunities in the UK and other European countries. Then I found information on colleges in Canada. The colleges are cheaper than universities. Also, the immigration system is much easier, well it looked easier on the website ... so I decided to apply for “project management. I thought there would be a lot of [job] opportunities if I study this.... I*

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<sup>8</sup> The CRS is a points-based system that is used to assess and score an applicant’s profile and rank it in the Express Entry pool based on applicant’s skills, education, language ability, work experience and other factors ([Government of Canada 2022](#)).

<sup>9</sup> Introduced in 2015, Express Entry (EE) provides a pathway to permanent residence for skilled workers in Canada or overseas. The system assigns points for skills, work experience, language ability, education, and other factors and high-ranking candidates are selected for immigration. Application can be submitted under three programs: the Federal Skilled Worker Program, the Federal Skilled Trades Program, and the Canadian Experience Class. In addition, provinces can also recruit candidates from EE through their Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs) ([IRCC 2020](#)).

*compared different programs on project management in different colleges but the program in Humber college looked more appealing. So, I applied to this college”.*

Similarly, ‘H’ who came to study at George Brown College from India describes how she decided to get an admission in the college to obtain permanent residency:

*“Many of my friends and colleagues migrated to Canada before me and I saw their experience. Applying for permanent residency from India is really a lengthy process. Often it takes three years and then, you know so many things change in those years. So, if you can migrate in six months, you will choose this path ... Also, getting a college degree [from Canada] is good for the job market because employers look for Canadian education. So, in both ways it was a better decision for me. Also, I always wanted to go out of India and learn new things, so I got admission in the program to get out of India”.*

A few students mention how expansion of career opportunities, and the chance of learning in a multicultural environment, developing new social and professional networks and gaining international perspectives influenced them to enroll in a Canadian college. But these aspects most often were secondary objectives, while gaining permanent status remained the primary objective.

Some stakeholders hold the public colleges responsible for creating unrealistic expectations among prospective international students by emphasizing the prospect of immigration in their marketing and advertising activities. Stakeholders from the college sector, however, point out how immigration policies construct international students as ideal immigrants and encourage them to pursue post-secondary education to become permanent residents in Canada.

A stakeholder from the government sector suggests that the government policy should be more transparent about the immigration prospects of international students, providing them with more realistic information about the employment, language, and other requirements for obtaining permanent status. This will enable students to make informed decisions about enrolling in college programs.

In addition, most stakeholders agree that colleges should not use immigration as a marketing strategy, but rather focus on promoting their learning, training, and career development initiatives. They also emphasize how recruitment agencies play a significant role in providing false immigration-related information to students and influencing their decisions to enroll in college programs.

### **3.3 Role of Recruitment Agencies**

A Council of Ministries of Education of Canada survey found nearly 80% of Canadian education institutes rely on education agents to recruit students ([One Voice Canada 2021](#)). A report by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) highlights three reasons that influence the dependency of Canadian postsecondary institutions on agents: to keep the cost of doing business abroad low, to compete effectively with other postsecondary institutions, and to have a continuing

presence in culturally diverse countries (Legusov 2017<sup>10</sup>; Jafar & Legusov 2021<sup>11</sup>). However, in practice, colleges in Ontario engage with recruitment agencies to ensure an increasing supply of international students. Ontario's public colleges paid more than \$114 million in commissions to recruiters in 2020-21 ([Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2021](#)).

A recent CBC documentary created by the Fifth estate ([Sold a Lie](#)) demonstrated how recruitment agencies provide false promises to students in India regarding college programs, employment and immigration to recruit them for Canadian colleges. These agencies often help students obtain a false English language test (TOEFL/IELTS) to get college admission. Many Indian students invest their own savings, sell their parents' properties, or borrow funds to enroll in these colleges. After coming to Canada, many students face challenges associated with high living costs, academic programs, language barriers, employment, and lengthy, costly, and competitive immigration process. The documentary depicted how financial difficulties and lack of support in Canada often cause depression, frustration and even suicide among many Indian students.

Recruiting students is a lucrative business for agencies as each agency earns up to \$3,000 to \$4,000 per student from Canadian post secondary institutions ([One Voice Canada 2021](#)). Ontario's public colleges do not hesitate to pay these agents to enroll increasing numbers of international students whose tuition fees guarantee their revenue generation. Thus, colleges are to some extent dependent on these agents for maintaining this revenue source. Both agencies and colleges want to maximize their profits and this focus on profitability can conflict with the objectives of the international students (Jafar and Legusov 2021). As Fischer (2011)<sup>12</sup> suggests, paying third parties to recruit students is an inherently flawed practice that marginalizes the interests of students. Moreover, college admission is dominated by recruitment agencies in two countries, India, and China. As a result, more than half of international students in public colleges came from these two countries in 2020/21, which to some extent affected student's multicultural learning experience ([Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2021](#)).

Several empirical studies also corroborate this argument. For example, a survey based on 385 Canada-bound international students from 59 countries revealed that nearly half of the participants used education agents during their application and most of them had unsatisfactory experiences in dealing with the agents ([Xu and Miller 2021](#)). In many cases, the agents influenced students to select the program and the specific institution without explaining the rationale behind those choices. According to Jafar and Legusov (2021: 745), "agents not only have a substantial influence on international students' choice of college and program, but also increasingly assist them with matters traditionally handled by colleges, such as helping them with accommodation, employment, and immigration formalities". In this way, they charge students for services which are often offered by the college free of charge.

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<sup>10</sup> Legusov, O. (2017). The growing reliance of Ontario colleges of applied arts and technology on educational agents for the recruitment of international students. *College Quarterly*, 20(1), n1.

<sup>11</sup> Jafar, H., & Legusov, O. (2021). Understanding the decision-making process of college-bound international students: A case study of greater Toronto area colleges of applied arts and technology. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 45(7), 463-478.

<sup>12</sup> Fischer, K. (2011). Community college draws foreign students by serving as a gateway to universities. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

### 3.3.1 Public-Private Partnership

Besides relying on recruitment agencies, many public colleges have adopted privatization policy by forming partnerships with private, for-profit campuses in Ontario. As of June 2021, 11 of the 24 Ontario public colleges were partnered with a total of 12 for-profit private career colleges with a total of more than 24,000 international students enrolled under these arrangements, up from 14,698 in 2018 ([Keung 2023](#)). For example, Cambrian College partnered with Hansen College in Brampton and Toronto; Mohawk College partnered with Pures College in Scarborough; and St. Lawrence College partnered with Alpha International Academy in Toronto. Through a partnership contract, a private college purchases the name, branding, curriculum, and credentials of the public college. In return, a public college retains a portion of the fees paid by each international student enrolled in programs delivered by the private partner ([Office of Auditor General of Ontario 2021](#)). Some of these partnerships did not uphold enrollment requirements. Using recruitment agencies, private colleges enroll more students than they should to generate revenue. The instructors in these private colleges are paid substantially less than Ontario college faculty and they have no union protection. Thus, several publicly funded colleges take advantage of the exploitative recruitment practices adopted by private colleges. This profit generating business model of public colleges in Ontario largely ignores the challenges and vulnerabilities of international students.

### 3.3.2 Students' Varied Experiences

Of the 18 students who participated in the study, less than half (8 students) sought help and support from recruitment agencies to secure admission to the college. The majority of students found these agencies helpful in gathering information about college programs, tuition fees, visa processing, employment, housing, and immigration processes. Their experiences indicate that they did not receive comprehensive information on these aspects from the college websites or any other virtual platforms. The students were attracted to the agencies due to the access to comprehensive information about their journey from their country of origin to the Canadian college. 'G', who came from France and is currently studying Community Work at George Brown College, explains her experience with the recruitment agency:

*"I contacted an agency to know about the programs. The agency told me about this [Community Work] program and how demanding it is in the job market. They helped with the visa process and provided me with a lot of information on employment opportunities. They made the process easy for me, otherwise it is difficult to know about the programs and compare the colleges. They did everything on behalf of me, filling the form and submitting papers. So, the process was not that hard."*

However, 'G' did not have any idea that the agency received a commission for ensuring her admission in the college. Since she did not pay any fee directly to the agency, she thought that the service was free.

Similarly, 'J' who came from Chile and is studying in the same program (Community Work) at George Brown College, did not have to pay any fee to the recruitment agency. So, she also thought that the agency helped her for free. These students are completely unaware that they paid the agencies via the college.

On the other hand, ‘H’ who came from India had to pay a fee directly to the agency. According to ‘H’:

*“I paid a fee to the agency and the agency helped me with the paperwork. It was less time consuming this way. They also provided me with a lot of information about the college, the surrounding community, and work opportunities in Canada”.*

These diverse experiences indicate that recruitment agencies operate differently in different countries. While the agencies in France and Chile do not take any fee directly from the students, those in India take a fee from the prospective students on top of their commission from the colleges. For these agencies, India is a lucrative place for business where they can easily provide misleading information to exploit potential students as demonstrated in the documentary [Sold a Lie](#).

### **3.3.3 How to Regulate Recruitment Agencies?**

The experiences of the students emphasize the need for a regulatory framework to ensure ethical practices of the education agents. Currently, public colleges in Ontario have limited guidelines to monitor and assess the transactions between the colleges and agencies and those between agencies and students. There is a lack of governance and policy guidelines regarding the selection and removal of recruitment agencies if they provide misleading information to prospective students. Some of the stakeholders shed light on these issues. According to a stakeholder from the college sector:

*“Recruitment agencies operate outside of Canada, so controlling their roles is not possible for the college authorities. We cannot control what they promise or not. There is no way to know the local factors that shape the whole process. We also do not know which agency is reliable and which is not, we often blindly rely on them.”*

A stakeholder from the government sector disagrees with the idea that colleges cannot control recruitment agencies. She argues that colleges have the ability to establish and enforce guidelines for ethical and transparent recruitment practices:

*“Ontario public colleges cannot control the activities of the agencies that operate outside of Canada, but they can ensure agents are qualified professionals who follow ethical guidelines. They can put in place these ethical guidelines, for example, that these agencies cannot promise anything about immigration or employment. These agencies are not qualified to provide information on these topics ... The colleges should have their own local representatives to monitor the roles of the agencies. It is possible to create a mechanism for accountability, so colleges can do a lot.”*

Likewise, stakeholders from the non-profit sector describe the importance of colleges creating a regulatory framework to monitor and evaluate the functions of recruitment agencies. One stakeholder highlights the importance of including students in the assessment process.

*“Colleges should provide the scope for students to file complaints against the agents and put in place measures to hold the agencies responsible for their unethical and exploitative practices in the recruitment process. If they take into account the voices of students, the agencies will be forced to change their strategies because their business is based on students ... so their [students’] opinion will matter”.*

Stakeholders from the college sector are increasingly concerned about the reliance of public colleges on recruitment agencies, and they emphasize the need for a change in this practice. One stakeholder suggests reducing dependence on these agencies as a potential solution:

*“One of the challenges, I think, is that because these agents work in their own country, so they are not in the jurisdiction of Canada, it is very difficult to regulate some of the things like IRCC has the license for immigration advising. Now these agents become like immigration advisors and help them to apply for study permits and sometimes they are not providing the right information. How do we regulate that? I don't know the full answer to that ..., I think not relying heavily on the agents is a good strategy”.*

Another stakeholder from the college sector mentions how the college administration is planning to develop a regulatory guideline to bring changes in the ways the college engages with recruitment agencies.

*“We are creating a guideline regarding what the agencies can and cannot promise. We also want to diversify source countries and cut ties with the agencies if necessary. We will also promote our programs through the college web page/social media platforms ... we understand that we need to bring change in the ways these agencies are operating to ensure ethical practice and get better quality students.”*

Most stakeholders also agree that depending exclusively on recruitment agencies in one country (India) is not a wise decision as it creates the scope for the agencies to exploit prospective students as well as decreases the opportunity of multicultural learning in the colleges. Although stakeholders from the college sector acknowledged the need to reduce their reliance on recruitment agencies, no one suggested completely eliminating these agencies from the student enrollment process.

### **3.4 Academic Adjustment**

When international students arrive on Canadian campuses, they face multiple linguistic, cultural, financial, and mental health challenges. High tuition fees, difficulties balancing school and work, difficulties finding accommodation, cultural shock and missing their families further exacerbate their challenges with integration into a new university/college and an unfamiliar society. Most international students (both in colleges and universities) find it difficult to fit in among their peers. Many of them have less than desirable social interactions with Canadian born students ([Scott et al. 2015](#)). Language barriers, diverse cultural norms, and lack of opportunities to engage in social activities create barriers for social interactions between domestic and international students. Moreover, many get low grades due to lack of a diverse perspective in the curriculum, teachers' biases or lack of cultural awareness in disciplinary decisions ([Adeyemi 2017](#); [Dehaas 2013](#)). Although, most faculty members respect the increasing diversity among students, they often are not prepared and trained to deal with diverse identities and views of international students (Bartell 2003<sup>13</sup>). University and college services often do not offer programs that bring faculties, and international and domestic students together to enhance their social participation (Arthur 2017).

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<sup>13</sup> Bartell, M. (2003). Internationalization of universities: A university culture-based framework. *Higher education*, 45, 43-70.

International students also need opportunities to share their concerns and learning needs, and to access help with lectures, assignments, and exams to enhance their academic performance.

### **3.4.1 The Effect of Financial Difficulties**

Confirming previous studies, many student participants in this study describe how it is difficult for them to comprehend and adjust with Canadian academic culture, such as political correctness, teacher-student communication, and the west-centric curriculum. However, they emphasize financial pressure as the main reason behind their academic challenges.

Unlike universities, colleges provide little or no financial support in the form of scholarships and bursaries. As a result, most students face severe financial difficulties in Toronto which affect their academic learning. As they must work one to two part-time jobs to pay the tuition fees, rent and bills, they get very little time to focus on classes and develop relations with classmates. A student, 'P', studying Marketing Management at Seneca College explains his daily routine as such:

*"I wake up very early in the morning at 4 am and then go to Walmart to do my morning job [moving boxes from storage to the mall] for three hours, from 5-8 am, then I go to my second job in a grocery store and work there until 3 pm ... My classes start after 4pm, most of my classes take place in the evening. So, I attend the classes till 8/9 pm. By then, I am really tired. ... I go home and eat something. Most of the days I do assignments. I woke up early in the morning the next day again for the Walmart job. So, you see, I have no time even to sleep. I sleep for two hours, maximum three hours ...I do not get to socialize, not with classmates, not with anyone else. I feel like I am alone, and no one understands my situation and cares about me".*

Like 'P', most students feel isolated despite studying, working, and living in Toronto. Some students point towards the high international tuition fees as the main reason why most college students struggle to pay attention to studies. According to 'J', who studies Community Work at George Brown college, international students in the college feel depressed about paying three/four times higher tuition fees than their domestic counterparts because they do not get much help and support with their studies at the college.

*"We do not know why we are paying so much, we go to the same class, learn the same thing, do the same assignment. There is nothing extra for us to help us with our assignments. I have learned everything by myself ... The college treats us in the same way so why do they ask us to pay more?"*

Some college students, who had already earned a Bachelor or a Master degree from their country of origin, mentioned that high tuition fees are unjustified as the quality of college education in Canada is often not good. Since they already have a postsecondary degree, they find the college curriculum quite easy. This is why justifying high tuition fees is often difficult for them. For example, 'O' obtained a Bachelor Degree in Engineering from Iran and currently she is studying Software Programming in Humber College. She feels that she is paying too much to learn the same program that she already learned in her Bachelor program in Iran. She also thinks that high tuition fees are the reason why many college students work for long hours overlooking their academic tasks.

*“I already know how this software works. We learned this in the 2nd year of our program in Iran ... I understand the colleges are making money from us. Even if we learn it for the first time, still we do not need to pay that much. Canadian students and international students are learning the same software, but one group is paying four times more ... No way students can afford that so they work for long hours, so they often fail in the exam!!”*

### **3.4.2 The Cost of Education**

When it comes to international tuition fees, stakeholders from the college sector point out that educating international students often requires more funding compared to domestic students since their studies are not subsidized by taxpayers. Colleges need to invest a significant amount of resources to support international students' education and provide academic services. As one stakeholder from the college sector explains:

*“We provide education to international students whose study is not subsidized by the government. And we provide them a lot of services that domestic students do not need as they already know the Canadian society and the system. International students need a lot of support to get settled in the college and in the city. Many international students need and use academic services to enhance their performance in the class ... we provide a lot to them, so the tuition fee is justified”.*

Most stakeholders, however, criticized colleges for their business model, which treats international students as 'cash cows' and neglects their challenges and needs. They argue that international college students not only pay high tuition fees, but the fees also keep increasing, making them even more vulnerable. Some stakeholders also note that the government's policy of freezing tuition fees for domestic students has had a negative impact on international students. As one stakeholder from the non-profit sector states:

*“The Ontario government froze tuition fees for domestic college students for three consecutive years [2020-2023], while international students have been paying an increasing amount during this period to fill the tuition gap. This is bad for international students and for colleges because this has increased the dependency of colleges on international students”.*

According to most stakeholders, international tuition fees are unjustified. However, some of them also point out that there are issues with the visa process and students' ability to handle the cost of studying in Toronto. Obtaining a student visa requires applicants to demonstrate their financial capacity to pay for their education, so it is expected that they can afford tuition fees and living expenses. Nevertheless, stakeholders recognize that students often do not have accurate information about the cost of education and housing in Toronto and may rely on recruitment agencies, which may not provide the most reliable information (as discussed earlier). Additionally, many students may need to borrow money from banks or relatives to secure their visas and then work to pay off their debts while studying, leading to financial pressures that can impact their academic performance.

### 3.5 Employment

Despite having Canadian education and training, proficiency in English/French and familiarity with Canadian society, many international students are underperforming in the labour market during their study period as well as after graduation. Recent research by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) found that 43% of international students were having difficulties finding paid employment ([CBIE 2021](#); [ICEF Monitor 2018](#)). These difficulties often result from students' inability to understand the expectations of Canadian employers and employers' unfamiliarity with regulations for hiring international students ([CBIE 2021](#)). Many of the international graduates who participated in the Post-Graduation Work Permit programme worked only part time and/or for a low-income ([ICMPD 2019](#)). A study by Statistics Canada reports that former international students earned 20% less than their domestic counterparts in the first year after graduation and 9% less five years after graduation ([Choi, Hao and Chan 2021](#)). International students who generally possess characteristics (such as post secondary education and Canadian credentials) associated with higher earnings, earn less than similar domestic students six years post graduation (Frenette, Lu and Chan 2019<sup>14</sup>).

These studies confirm that many international students and graduates experience significantly larger obstacles than their domestic counterparts when trying to find appropriate employment commensurate with their education. International students in general lack social and professional connections in Canada (Flynn and Arthur 2013)<sup>15</sup>. Lacking professional networks, they cannot secure jobs in the 'hidden' job market where 80% of jobs are filled without public posting. International students rarely qualify for internships during their studies or placements upon graduation. In addition, many employers are unaware that international students can work legally in Canada and hesitate to offer jobs to those with temporary status. Employment barriers also stem from employers' preference for Canadian work experience; the challenge of language and cultural adaptability to Canadian workplaces; and students' perceived barriers ([Dauwer 2018](#)). All these factors affect international students enrolled in/or graduated from Ontario public colleges and force them to take up low-wage and precarious work that does not facilitate their career progression or transition to permanent status.

#### 3.5.1 Temporary Status Matters

International students and graduates who took part in the study found that college education was beneficial in developing skills and acquiring training that are in demand in the Canadian job market. Most colleges provide placement opportunities, allowing students to gain hands-on experience in their field of study. However, many students expressed disappointment because employers often do not offer long-term or full-time job opportunities due to their temporary status. After completing a one-year diploma program in Finance and Business studies from Centennial

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<sup>14</sup> Frenette, M., Lu, Y., & Chan, W. (2019). The Postsecondary Experience and Early Labour Market Outcomes of International Study Permit Holders. Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series. Statistics Canada. 150 Tunney's Pasture Driveway, Ottawa, ON K1A 0T6, Canada.

<sup>15</sup> Flynn, S., & Arthur, N. (2013). International students' views of transition to employment and immigration. *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, 12(1), 28-37.

college, 'L' (who also earned a Law degree from Uganda) could not secure a full-time job in Toronto due to his temporary status:

*“The first thing is that I have a temporary [PGWP] visa and it is only for a year. So, when I applied for jobs, employers were impressed by my CV, and they called me for interviews. But the first thing they asked me, “are you a Canadian PR or citizen?”. And I knew immediately, I will not get the job. So, there is this misunderstanding, I thought I would get a job easily because of my Canadian education but my visa is not working in my favour, it is working against me.”*

Most students and graduates emphasize how employers' lack of knowledge about the PGWP is a barrier for their career prospects. Many employers do not know that they can hire an international graduate. Moreover, the short length of their PGWP creates further challenges. Most college programs are one to two years long. So, college graduates get the PGWP for one to two years, which is a very short period for them to find a full-time job in their field of study. An Indian student (H), who studies Finance and Marketing at George Brown College elaborates on this:

*“I am already worried to think that after completing this program, I must find a job, a good one within one year! It takes time even to understand the job market, to develop networks and create personal connections with the employers. One year is not enough time at all ... I didn't realize this before coming to Toronto ... Now, I am thinking of enrolling in another one-year program, so then, I will get two years of PGWP to look for a job”.*

Like 'H' many students did not know that the length of their work permit would be related to the length of their study. So, some of them regret that they enrolled in a one-year program. But not all of them can afford another year of study. So, they feel helpless in terms of finding a job, especially, when they do not get time to develop professional and career networks. A George Brown College student ('Y') who came from the Philippines emphasizes the lack of access to career related network and support at the college campus and outside of the campus:

*“We are new in the city and in the job market. We do not know which employers are hiring and what kind of job we can apply for. How we can prepare ourselves for the job interviews. Some employers want employees to do a task in a certain way ... Many jobs are not even advertised because employers like to hire someone that they know, or their friends know. So, networking is very important. My friends told me you can only find a job here if you know someone in the sector ... the colleges do not provide information. ... They have some employment services but there is a long waiting time to get their advice”.*

Some stakeholders also highlight the limitations that are associated with the PGWP. For example, a stakeholder from the legal sector explains how international college students cannot work after the expiration of the PGWP unless their employers apply for a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) to keep him/her in the job. Since LMIA is a lengthy process that involves a fee and a lot of paperwork, many employers do not go through this process.

*“After completing their study, international students often get a job. But while they are working, their visa expires. PGPW is a one-time visa, so they cannot renew it. So, the only way they can stay in Canada and continue to work is if their employers apply for a LMIA ... I was involved with*

*a few such cases where employers had to go through the LMIA process, but after a while they gave up because it is expensive and time consuming. A lot of documentation is needed, and many red tapes need to be overcome. Employers do not think it is wise to spend so much money and time for one foreign employee, instead they can hire a PR or a Canadian citizen easily to do the job”.*

The limitation of the one-time PGWP is also highlighted by several international students. A Bangladeshi student (‘F’) who is studying Business Management at George Brown college states:

*“After my study, if I cannot find a job immediately, then I must leave Canada after one year. The work permit is not eligible to be renewed, like this type of restriction should be removed. It [PGWP] should come with an option to be renewed so that we get a chance to prove our skills in Canada”.*

Temporary status also limits students’ access to employment services. Particularly, those who graduated from the college program stress the absence of employment support for them after graduation. For example, ‘T’ came from Honduras and completed a diploma in Graphic Design from Humber college. After graduation, he found a part time job in the IT sector but failed to obtain a full-time job. He explains how lack of support affecting his job search:

*“After graduation, I was on my own. I knew that there was a demand for my degree in the job market but that was not enough. I could not show the employer that I know people in this field. Employers often do not trust us, the migrants. I had no one to talk to or explain my challenges ... I paid my tuition fees, I pay tax, I obey the rules, I do everything that a permanent resident does but I do not have any access to social services. This is strange ... So, after graduation, it is about luck, you find your way [in the job market], no one will help you.”*

Most stakeholders agree that employers are not ready to hire from the international student pool and that there is a significant gap in providing career support for international students at the public colleges in the GTA. Some stakeholders suggest that the government should play a key role to convince employers to hire international college students and graduates. Stakeholders also stressed the need for developing a system that can match students’ skills with employment industries. A stakeholder from the non-profit sector highlights the structural issues and systematic barriers that shape employers’ attitudes toward international students and graduates:

*“We are still bearing the legacy of racism in Canada, whether we accept it or not, that is the reality. These students are mostly racialized people, who are not valued in the labour market. It does not matter if they have Canadian education, they still lack, like employers say, they do not have ‘soft skills’. This is a kind of racism... we all need to get out of this mindset. When employers will get out of this mindset, then many of their employment challenges will be resolved. Unless then, it [international students’ employment challenges] will continue”.*

The narratives of the current and former international college students suggest that despite getting education and training that are of demand in the job market, they face numerous challenges to obtain a job due to their temporary status, short length of their PGWP, systemic barriers and lack of career development and networking opportunities.

### 3.6 Immigration

The intention among international students to obtain permanent residency in Canada is relatively high. The 2018 survey of the CBIE (2018) showed that approximately 70% of international students planned to stay and work in Canada upon graduation and 60% intended to apply for permanent residency. A recent study found that about only 3 in 10 international students who entered Canada in 2000 or later became a landed immigrant within 10 years (Crossman et al. 2022). Their lower-than-expected transition rate falls short of the students' stated intention and the Canadian policy objective in terms of retaining international graduates.

International college students are more likely than university students to plan to stay in Canada (CBIE 2021), but their transition rate is lower than their university counterparts. Comparing outcomes between students in the 2010 and 2016 cohorts in college/certificate and master's degree programs, a recent report by Dennler (2022) shows that there is a large gap between intent and opportunity for getting permanent status among students at the college/certificate level and this gap is increasing. The report concludes that, "international students in college/ certificate programs either take longer to become permanent residents or are less likely than Master's degree students to be eligible for permanent residency" (Dennler 2022:10).

As discussed earlier, public colleges in Ontario often recruit international students with the promise of pathways to permanent residence (Banerjee 2022). These colleges explicitly advertise government policies (such as PGWP and two-step immigration programs) to recruit international students, but they offer limited information and support to facilitate students' transition process.

#### 3.6.1 Beyond A College Degree

Most students who pursued college admission in Canada with the objective of getting permanent residency eventually realized that their study does not guarantee permanent residency. Initially, many students and graduates thought that the immigration process would be easy after completing their college degree as they would get more points in the Comprehensive Ranking System for their Canadian education and experience. As 'L' who received a diploma in Finance and Business Studies from Centennial college states:

*"Immigration system values Canadian education. I thought I will get a higher score for the college degree, then I will do better in the English Language test. Of course, after studying here, my English will be better. And I have work experience, so it sounds easy, doesn't it? I did not know before coming that getting PR would be so difficult. I didn't know that I needed to get a very good job to qualify for Express Entry ... the job market is so difficult; nobody wants to give migrants a good job!"*

Like 'L', many participants thought that a degree from a college would guarantee their permanent residency in Canada. However, when they learned that they need one-year work experience in a skilled occupation and high language score to be qualified for Express Entry's Canadian Experience Class,<sup>16</sup> they felt depressed and heartbroken. They usually get only one to two years

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<sup>16</sup> Since 2008, the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) has offered a major pathway for candidates who have worked in Canada and want to transition to permanent residence. The CEC is a prominent option for temporary foreign

after graduation to gather work experience and language score which is often unrealistic given the labour market barriers they face (discussed in the previous section). ‘A’, who recently received a diploma in Community and Social Services from Seneca College, explains her immigration barriers as such:

*“Before coming from Mexico, I did not know about the whole process of application. I did not know about the Express Entry and how it works. After coming to the college, I talked to a staff member at the International Student Office, and she told me that I need work experience to apply for PR. It is not just any work; I need a good job and a full-time job ... the job market is difficult for us ... So, getting a job and getting the experience and then applying and then waiting for the result, it won’t happen in just one year!! So, the system is not helping us, the system is made to make PR difficult for us, the college students.”*

Besides the time limitation related to their work permit, the competitive nature of the permanent residency application process also affects their transition experience. Some of the international college students highlight how getting a high score through the CRS is challenging as they have to compete with other university and college graduates as well as many temporary foreign workers. Some students are considering other options, such as Provincial Nominee Programs and Atlantic Migration Programs to apply for permanent status. However, they do not have clear information about the application requirements and processes for these programs. An information gap related to immigration process is evident in their narratives. For example, ‘C’, a Humber College student, explains:

*“I know now that I have several options, I can apply through the PNP from here [Ontario], or I can change the province and go to Saskatchewan or Nova Scotia, where the competition is low. But then I need to get a job offer for PNP, I think, but I do not know anyone there, so getting a job offer would be hard ... I am collecting information but navigating the [IRCC] website is not easy. You get a lot of information, but nothing is still clear ...”*

Most students who shared their experience are uncertain about getting permanent residency, but they do not have any alternate plan as immigration was their main objective for college admission. They also do not receive much support with their immigration process from the college or other service providers. Often, they receive a very general orientation on immigration process at the college, but the general guidelines often do not answer their specific questions. So, while colleges often promise a pathway to immigration, they do not provide services to facilitate transition.

Stakeholders concur that international college students and graduates lack clear and precise information on the requirements for obtaining permanent residency and require immigration-related services. Additionally, they emphasize the need for colleges to be more transparent about the transition process, enabling international students to navigate it more effectively. Furthermore, they agree that immigration-related information is currently not being clearly communicated to

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workers and international graduates who go on to gain Canadian work experience. The CEC is among the three programs managed under Canada's Express Entry system (Sweetman, A and Warman, C. [2010](#)).

international students by the government, colleges, and education agencies. A stakeholder from the settlement sector states:

*“International students have a painted picture in their mind about immigration and also if the government tells them you most likely will not get the PR, then it will go against their immigration policy because policy says that they are the ideal future immigrants ... Colleges cannot highlight the transition challenges because this will discourage international students and recruitment agencies basically sell immigration to students. This is a deep level issue and to solve this issue the immigration policies and college policies should be in alignment. ... If students know better, they will be prepared better”.*

Stakeholders emphasize the need for visa and immigration-related services for international students and recent graduates. Some stakeholders believe that colleges should allocate more funding to provide immigration services and support for their transition, while others advocate for a partnership between the settlement sector and college sector to deliver such services. Further details on collaborative partnerships are provided in the 'Discussion and Recommendations' section (Section 4).

### **3.7 Social Integration**

International students' social integration is significantly affected by their experience of isolation, discrimination and mental health issues. Many international students face discrimination in post-secondary institutions as well as in the labour market. In 2013, a survey of 1,509 international students indicated that 23% had experienced racial discrimination at school and one-fourth had experienced racial discrimination when interacting with people off-campus ([Ortiz and Choudaha 2014](#)). Another study in Ontario conducted in 2015 revealed that international students faced discriminatory behaviours from employers on racial, religious, and ethnicity grounds ([Scott et al. 2015](#)). International students' experience of loneliness and isolation is also reported by Irwin-Robinson ([2002](#))<sup>17</sup>. Having institutional help and support is essential for them to deal with such experiences. A study of Chinese students conducted by Liu ([2016](#)) revealed that many students who suffer from culture shock, isolation and mental health issues do not receive effective support from campus services as most university staff who provide services to international students lack the necessary training. These studies point towards the urgent need for services and support to help students deal with discrimination and mental health issues.

The need for mental health support for international colleges students in Ontario (Peel Region) is specifically emphasized by the Founder and CEO, Punjabi Community Health Services. He highlights how the shortage of affordable housing, academic and financial pressures, difficulties accessing services, and limited social support contribute to high rates of 'youth breakdown' for international students ([Joseph 2019](#)). Often loneliness, isolation, depression, lack of knowledge of rights exposes them to drug and sex trades ([Joseph 2019](#)). Enhancing mental health support and enabling deeper interaction between students and the wider community is essential to combat discrimination and isolation of international students.

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<sup>17</sup> Irwin-Robinson, H. M. (2002). *International students in community college: The Canadian experience of African international students*. Doctoral Dissertation, Michigan State University.

### **3.7.1: Community Connection**

Often, many international students feel integrated in the college but not in the community where they live or in the workplace in which they work. Experiences of overt and covert racism at the workplace, crowded and unhealthy living conditions, constant financial pressure, and stress of study, work, and uncertain immigration outcomes affect their mental health. An Egyptian student ('E') of Durham College, who suffered from mental health issues in Canada, explains his experience:

*“You need to understand what we go through when we come here [Toronto], this is a new place for us and we learn about racism, we experience it for the first time. But I cannot say anything to my employer because I need the job to survive ... Then there are expectations of family back home. I tell them I am happy here; all is well, I do not tell them my financial situation. Then there is uncertainty about getting PR and we do not get time to make friends. We share a home with many people that we do not know ... Basically, we face many challenges all alone ... I felt that I have no power to change my life and that's how I got depressed!!”*

Like 'E', many students mention that they feel isolated and disconnected from the surrounding community. Some stakeholders indicate the importance of connecting students to the local community and creating opportunities for them to participate in the student and community organizations so that they develop a sense of belonging in the community. They shed light on how the increasing involvement of international students in the student organizations in recent years is a positive sign as it provides a platform for them to raise their voice and make their challenges visible. For example, a stakeholder from the government sector states:

*“Now international students are not isolated, they are involved in student organizations, in fact they are in the leadership role, which is necessary. They need to have connections with the community, student groups and cultural groups, so they will feel a part of the school and the society ... So, colleges now feel the pressure of providing them services because they [students] are asking for the services through media and social media and they are sharing their challenges. Their challenges are not hidden anymore, so colleges know that they need to provide them services”.*

The perspectives of students and stakeholders suggest that participating in community and social groups can have a positive impact on students' mental health and empowerment. It allows them to raise their voice and seek mental health support as well as express their service needs.

### **3.7.2 Mental Health Services**

When international students seek mental health support, most often they fail to access it. Student participants who faced mental health challenges often did not get much support from the colleges. Some of them, however, mention that there is support at the colleges, but the waiting period is long and that the support is very limited compared to the number of students. 'J' who studies Community Work at George Brown college describes how she was unsuccessful in getting support for her mental health issues at the college:

*“I received an email from the college office about mental health support. They asked us to fill in a form and email them and they will contact us. So, I filled out the form and emailed them, but they did not respond. So, after two weeks, I emailed again and got no response ... I did not call because there wasn't any phone number. They only provided the email address. So, there was no way to communicate with them.”*

Most students agree that the colleges have very limited capacity to provide mental health services. As a result, students often rely on community organizations for help and support. An Indian student at Sheridan College ('Z') describes how a Punjabi community organization helps international college students to deal with mental health and drug related issues:

*“The organization reaches out to students suffering from mental health challenges. Often when students feel depressed, they get involved in drugs and underground crimes. So, they need help, and they get the help through community trust ... students feel comfortable to share their anxiety with the community workers. So, the program is working because the community workers are very committed, they really want to help the students”.*

Stakeholders from the settlement sector highlight how many international students are relying on community organizations for mental health support, as they are not receiving adequate support on college campuses. They urge colleges to take more responsibility in addressing students' mental health needs.

Stakeholders from the college sector acknowledge that providing adequate mental health services to international students should be a priority for colleges. Some of them have even mentioned that they are re-evaluating their budget and service structures to improve mental health support for these students. For instance, one stakeholder states:

*“It is our duty to make sure that international students are getting adequate support with mental health issues. They deserve the support from us. We understand that we need to provide more resources and staff and we are working on it”.*

Furthermore, stakeholders from the college sector recognise their responsibility for providing not only mental health services but also a variety/an array of settlement and integration services to international students. This sentiment is echoed in the following statement of a stakeholder:

*“I think it is a bigger picture that we need to look for. So, because these students are relying on us to give them that education that they are asking for, there is no compromise, there should be no compromise in terms of the quality of education, and quality of services and support that we can provide ... We do it for Canadian students, we must do the same thing for international students ... I think whatever we do, whether it is academic support, mental health support, immigration support or career support, there is no compromise in providing that support”.*

## SECTION 4: SERVICE FRAMEWORK

### 4.1 Gaps in Service Provision

Stakeholders are aware of the challenges faced by international students and their service needs. However, there is still a significant gap between the services required and the services provided. The literature identifies two levels of service gaps for international students: policy-level gaps and institutional/college-level gaps.

#### 4.1.1 Policy Gaps in Service Provision

Canadian policies highlight the strategic role of international students in the country's economic development and future prosperity. Several government programs are designed to attract international students to Canada as they are considered significant for increasing the revenues of Canadian post-secondary institutions, for stimulating local economies and for building a highly skilled labour force. Released in 2014, Canada's first federal International Education Strategy (IES) acknowledges that international students in Canada provide immediate and significant economic benefits to Canadians in every region of the country ([Government of Canada 2014](#)). The recent Canadian IES (2019–2024) has further emphasized the importance of international students in Canada's long-term economic success and competitiveness in the 21st century ([Government of Canada 2019](#)). International students are also a strategic component of Canada's Economic Action Plan, its international trade and innovation strategies, and its immigration and foreign policy ([Scott et al. 2015](#)).

The government has restructured its immigration policies, providing two-step immigration pathways (through the Express Entry System and Provincial Nominee Programs) to facilitate international students' transition from temporary to permanent status. Canadian policies also support the integration of international students into the labor market by allowing them to work on- and off-campus ([Government of Canada 2020](#)). International students are normally allowed to work 20 hours a week during the academic terms. Last year (October 2022), the government temporarily lifted the 20-hour-per-week cap for one year (from November 15, 2022, to December 31, 2023) to provide students with a greater opportunity to gain valuable work experience in Canada. This decision also helped increase the availability of workers to sustain Canada's post-pandemic growth ([Keung and Koca 2022](#); [IRCC 2022](#)).

Additionally, the Post Graduate Work Permit (PGWP), which started in 2003 as a pilot program in selected provinces and expanded nationwide in 2005, allows international students to stay and work in Canada with an open work permit after graduation ([Government of Canada 2022](#)). The duration of the permit is based on the length of the completed study program, up to a maximum of three years. In January 2021, the government acknowledged the labour market challenges created by the global pandemic and introduced a temporary program through which international graduates can extend their PGWP for up to 18 months, so they have additional time to acquire the required Canadian work experience to qualify for permanent residency (IRCC 2021). The PGWP program aims to achieve four objectives: 1) to provide the necessary job experience required to apply for some permanent residence streams, 2) to facilitate international students' contribution to the

Canadian labour market, 3) to increase the pool of qualified candidates for eventual immigration, and 4) to make Canada a more attractive destination of study (Moltaji 2019<sup>18</sup>; [Dawson 2022](#)).

The federal government also adopted several targeted policies to support the ability of Canadian Post Secondary Institutions (PSIs) to continue enrolling large numbers of international students. For example, to promote the attractiveness of Canadian education to international students, the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces, created EduCanada, the international education division of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, now Global Affairs Canada (Williams et al. 2015<sup>19</sup>). As part of the promotion of Canadian education overseas, EduCanada disseminates information on the advantages of studying in Canada which helps PSIs to recruit international students ([Edu-Canada 2015](#)).

Although the federal and provincial governments have taken these strong policy measures to facilitate the entry and transition to permanent residence of international students, they have largely overlooked supporting their integration as they pursue their education and transition to the workforce. Interviewing front-line workers assisting international students, an immigrant-serving organization, and government representatives, Roach (2011) suggests that immigration policy reforms aiming to attract and retain international students have not been accompanied by the necessary changes to traditional settlement and international student services resulting in service gaps for this segment of Canada's international student population.

Canada has a well-organized federal government funded settlement service sector that offers free language and employment training, networking opportunities, referrals and information sessions for permanent residents (Flynn and Bauder 2015<sup>20</sup>). However, as temporary migrants, international college students are not eligible for these services (except for students in Quebec). International students can access some provincially funded settlement services, but the scope of these services is very limited. Of all the settlement services offered in Ontario, for example, only 20% of settlement services are funded by the province, compared to 80% which are funded by the federal government (Roach 2011)<sup>21</sup>. Recently, the Ontario government has made some significant investments to deliver services to international students through various settlement and community organizations, such as [COSTI](#), [Indus Community Services](#), [Punjabi Community Health Services](#), and [Achev](#). Nonetheless, services provided by different organizations are often fragmented, inconsistent and marked by lack of training ([Joseph 2019](#)). Students often have little information on these off-campus services. Moreover, these services are not sufficient to serve the large number of international student population in Ontario.

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<sup>18</sup> Moltaji, G. (2019). A Sociological Review of the Post Graduate Work Permit Program as a Pathway to Permanent Residency for International Students in Canada, MA thesis, University of Ottawa.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, K., Williams, G., Arbuckle, A., Walton-Roberts, M., & Hennebry, J. (2015). *International students in Ontario's postsecondary education system, 2000-2012: An evaluation of changing policies, populations and labour market entry processes*. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

<sup>20</sup> Flynn, E., & Bauder, H. (2015). The private sector, institutions of higher education, and immigrant settlement in Canada. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 16(3), 539-556.

<sup>21</sup> Roach, E. (2011). Service needs and gaps for international students transitioning to permanent residency in a "two-step" immigration process: a Toronto-based study. *Master's Thesis, Ryerson University*.

### 4.1.2 Institutional Service Gaps

Most international students turn to their colleges for academic, employment, health, and immigration services, but find only limited support and services available (Arthur 2017). Although publicly funded colleges in Ontario are obligated by the provincial government to provide support to international students, such as language programs, housing supports, academic, career and peer counseling supports, health and other social service supports, orientation or welcome services, etc. (Ministry of Colleges and Universities 2022), these needs are not prioritized by Ontario public colleges (Buckner et al. 2021). International Student Offices often lack adequate resources and staff to provide the broad range of services required by the students, and there are no accountability measures in place to ensure that these services are in place (Buckner et al. 2021). In addition, there is limited coordination between governments and academic institutions to provide services that address the various social and labor market challenges and needs of international students while in the academic setting and in transitioning to the labor market. Thus, a detailed assessment is required to determine the effectiveness of government guidelines regarding the provision of services to international students.

After graduation, international students become even more vulnerable as they cannot access services from either the colleges or federally funded settlement agencies in their community (Akbar 2022). For example, they are unable to access newcomer employment support at a time when they need them the most to obtain a skilled job. There is a significant service gap during the period of transition when international students and graduates possess temporary status which can be from eight months to three years (Flynn and Bauder 2013). Some students who hold multiple work permits experience a lengthy period of temporariness that goes beyond three years (See Dennler 2022). The lack of settlement services often has a long term impact on their transition and integration (Belkhodja and Esses 2013).

### 4.2 What Can be Done?

Scholars and practitioners suggest several recommendations to address the service gap for international students. One recommendation is to expand the government's settlement-funding model to include services for international students, given their long-term economic contributions to the Canadian labor market (Dauwer 2018; Roach 2011). Federal and provincial governments could invest adequate funding and resources to provide settlement services for international students to meet the policy objective related to their retention. Along with stressing the need for increasing funding for settlement programs and services, a collaborative partnership among the federal and provincial governments, postsecondary institutions, and service provider organizations is emphasized in several studies as an effective strategy to resolve the service gap (Akbar 2022; Roach 2011; Joseph 2019; Kelly 2012<sup>22</sup>). The International Student Connect (ISC) program offers an example of this kind of collaboration in Ontario.

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<sup>22</sup> Kelly, N. T. (2012). International students as immigrants: Transition challenges and strengths of current and former students. Major Research Paper. Retrieved from Ryerson Digital Repository.

### **4.2.1 International Student Connect Program**

Established in 2013, International Student Connect (ISC) is a bilingual program funded by the government of Ontario and managed by COSTI Immigrant Services. It is a three-way partnership between provincial government, settlement agencies, and educational institutions that connects international students and their accompanying family members to settlement services and community networks to support their settlement and integration in Ontario (COSTI 2020).

The initial goal of the partnership was to design a program for international students to meet their information and orientation needs regarding the settlement process in Canada. Between 2013 and 2014, COSTI conducted a bilingual needs assessment in collaboration with 10 colleges and universities to understand what kind of services are offered by the institutions and what kind of services international students need. This assessment revealed that “*the colleges or universities are not ready to meet the settlement needs of the international student, though they do an excellent job of meeting their academic needs*” (Stakeholder from COSTI, 2023).

Recognizing a service gap for international students, the program has developed a coordinated service delivery system through which each education institution is matched with a settlement agency in the same region, or in the same neighboring locality. COSTI is responsible for coordinating the ISC program, which involves developing resources, training staff, and monitoring program delivery to ensure effective service provision. The staff from partner settlement agencies visit colleges and universities to deliver information sessions on topics that are identified either by the staff of the international students’ offices or by the international students themselves. Besides group workshops, settlement agencies also provide one-on-one services to students who may be dealing with personal and confidential issues such as mental health, finances, and immigration. Settlement sector staff are trained to understand the specific needs of international students, which often differ from those of landed immigrants and refugees.

According to the stakeholder from COSTI, the program has served over 40,000 students in person between 2013 and 2022. The program also provides online/virtual services. It has a [website](#) with a chatbot and an App (launched in 2021) to provide virtual consultations and services to international students free of charge. Up until 2022, over 100,000 students from both inside and outside of Canada accessed their digital resources. On average, the website has 25,000 to 30,000 page-views per month.

#### ***Challenges for the ISC Program***

Although ISC is a promising program, it is facing several challenges. First, there are often conflicting interests between the PSIs and settlement organizations. For example, colleges often do not promote the ISC program among the students because if students access services from settlement organizations, then colleges will not be able to justify their high international tuition fees. Colleges might also face more funding cuts from the government if they cannot show that they invest capital to provide services to international students. On the other hand, settlement organizations are eager to provide services to international students to secure additional funding. The competition for funding often hampers their collaboration for service delivery. Nonetheless, stakeholders from the settlement sector and college sector are hopeful about the partnership. They recognize the positive outcomes that they can achieve together. One stakeholder from the college sector states:

*“I personally support the collaborative approach because everyone brings their own expertise, resources. So now imagine, we have more resources to support our international students, ... If that is the bigger goal, to integrate our international students into our community, then we all are working towards the same goal. So, I am supportive. In terms of those [ISC] programs, I was involved in the initial stages when COSTI was exploring this option, and figuring out where the gaps are where they can provide support. I see the value and the content that they create, the webinars that they do, I think that's awesome. But definitely there is room to strengthen our understanding and collaboration”.*

Another challenge for the ISC program is that it receives limited funding from the Ontario government based on a 5-year cycle. Under the current cycle, the program has secured funding till 2027. According to the stakeholder from COSTI, the provincial funding allows settlement agencies to offer a small-scale service delivery program. For example, currently, the ISC program has partnership with only 22 out of 48 public universities and colleges in Ontario. It has partnered with 16 settlement organizations ([COSTI 2020](#); [Joseph 2022](#)), while there are 887 permanent settlement service locations in Ontario ([Praznik and Shields 2018](#)). The stakeholder from COSTI stresses the need for adequate funding to enhance and expand the program across Ontario:

*“If we get more funding, we will be more than happy to include other PSIs. The program is at a stage that it can be literally rolled out across the province”.*

There is a significant scope for the expansion of the ISC program to serve the unserved international students in Ontario. Despite funding limitations, this program has been successful in terms of reaching out to international students and making settlement services available for them. For its contributions in the settlement sector, the ISC program was nominated as one of the best practices by Pathways to Prosperity ([P2P](#)) in 2020.

#### **4.2.2 A Broad Partnership Framework**

Some scholars and practitioners suggest a broad partnership framework by including local community actors (such as career service centres, employment service centers, employers, civil society) in the collaborative partnership. Community actors have significant roles to play in assisting international students to make a transition to work and to permanent residency ([One Voice Canada 2021](#); [Joseph 2019](#)). These broader partnerships can help with capacity building and addressing broader international student concerns, increase transparency and communication between sectors and between different levels of government, avoid duplication of services and support programs ([Peel Newcomer Strategy Group 2021](#)).

Several Ontario public colleges support this partnership approach highlighting that the linkages with community and connections to industry are fundamental strengths of the Canadian college system. A report by Colleges and Institutes Canada ([2021](#):14) acknowledges that:

*“Many stakeholders, including institutions, and provincial/territorial governments all have a part to play in developing and providing the right supports with the aim of retaining international students. To address systemic barriers to cooperation and program overlap, creative solutions and incentives are necessary to increase collaboration between international student services and settlement services, offering the opportunity to build bridges between newcomers and international*

*students. Colleges and institutes across Canada have the existing capacity and understanding of both international students and settlement services to be a key partner in this expansion”.*

While Ontario public colleges acknowledge the importance of collaboration among key stakeholders, the implementation of this approach is still unclear. Most colleges have not developed a comprehensive action plan to establish partnerships with local stakeholders. Given the long-term potential of international college students in Canadian society, the labor market, and the economy, stakeholders need to strengthen their collaboration. Collaboration should be a two-way street, where both college administrators and stakeholders share responsibility and accountability. The question is how can this partnership model be materialized in reality? This question is further addressed in the discussion and recommendation section below.

## **SECTION 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Both interview narratives and discussions in published literature indicate that the issues related to international students in the public college sector in GTA are deeply rooted in the broader structural system. The Canadian government on the one hand promotes the education migration pathway to attract and retain global talent and on the other hand reduces funding for higher education. In response to steady funding cuts, colleges have become increasingly dependent on international tuition fees for revenue, and to attract a steady flow of students they adopted a profit-oriented model partnering with recruitment agencies. Agencies that operate outside of Canada also generate profits by providing false information and promises related to employment and immigration to prospective students. Within this systemic loop, international students struggle to access reliable information and comprehend their study and work experience in Canada.

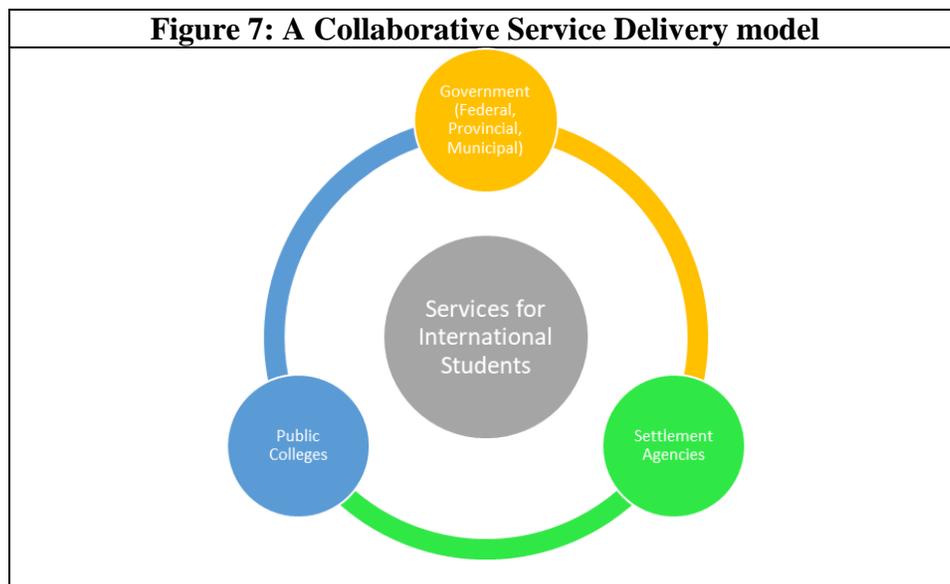
From the interviews of the international college students and graduates, it is clear that they need a range of services for accessing reliable information, academic and social integration, labour market integration, transitioning to permanent status and discrimination and mental health issues, but receive little support from colleges. Since international students (and PGWP holders) are temporary migrants, the federal government does not have a comprehensive plan to provide them federally funded services. Within the neoliberal political context, international students are expected to obtain Canadian education and experience and successfully integrate in the labour market and become permanent residents without any federally funded services.

There are limited provincial programs that provide services to international students via settlement and community organizations. While public colleges are obligated by the provincial regulations to provide services to meet students’ needs in order to maintain their status as Designated Learning Institutions, they invest limited resources to design and deliver services. Moreover, in the current framework, colleges and different organizations are providing services to international students in a fragmented way, which is difficult for students to navigate. With the limited social and labour rights that come with temporary status, many international college students, and graduates struggle to thrive in Canada. Some also suffer from depression, mental illness and even commit suicide ([Sold a Lie 2022](#)). This cycle can be harmful for the reputation of Canadian colleges and the education sector in general. Considering today’s knowledge and technology-based economy when most OECD countries are competing for global talent, Canada may risk losing in the global talent market.

## 5.1 A Collaborative Service Delivery Model

To move beyond the current state of isolated and fragmented services and ad-hoc collaborations, “Canada needs a comprehensive and collaborative federal policy framework that connects the roles of the governments, PSIs and local settlement agencies to provide pre- and post-arrival services to the international student population in order to achieve the goals of its immigration policy and international education strategy” (Akbar [2022](#)). Stakeholders who participated in the study also agree that a collaborative partnership among public colleges, the federal and provincial governments, and settlement and community sectors is the best approach. An example of such collaboration already exists in the International Student Connect program (discussed earlier). Although the program faced some challenges due to conflicting interests between colleges and settlement organizations regarding funding, it has provided a framework upon which to build better collaboration models.

The lessons learned from the ISC program can help stakeholders address funding issues. Instead of competing for funding, settlement organizations and colleges can complement one others’ services and funding by developing a collaborative service model (Figure 7). For example, colleges are often not equipped to provide employment, immigration settlement services so they can pay a small fee per student (from their tuition fees) to settlement organizations to get those services for international students. Settlement agencies have a long history of providing pre- and post-arrival information, orientation, referral, employment, language, immigration, mental health, and networking services to newcomers. They can use their expertise and personnel to deliver these services to international students (Flynn and Bauder 2013). Colleges can also hire staff from the settlement organizations to provide specific services, such as mental health services, at the college campus.



Colleges have experience providing academic support to international students and they can play a leading role in delivering academic services and creating opportunities on campus for interaction between international and domestic students. As the service needs of international students differ

from those of newcomer permanent residents, the settlement agencies and colleges can collaborate to develop or adapt specific service programs that reflect the diverse challenges and needs of international students. The diverse and intersectional identities of international students based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status also influence their social and economic integration and need to be considered.

The provincial government could help foster partnerships between colleges and settlement organizations and provide funding to both. Government funding is essential for colleges to provide quality education, training, and services to the future labour force, and funding is equally crucial for settlement organizations to sustain the service infrastructure necessary to support the growing number of international students and newcomers. The experiences of international college students are also connected to the local community context. Multiple factors, such as local labour market conditions, the size and socio-demographic makeup of the population, local community resources, as well as attitudes toward international students shape their challenges. Therefore, public colleges and local settlement agencies should work together to consider these factors when designing program interventions.

## **5.2 Specific Recommendations**

### **5.2.1 Addressing Structural Gaps**

- Government should increase funding for colleges (or at least cease further funding cuts) so that colleges do not become disproportionately dependent on international students for revenue generation. Public colleges should be ‘truly’ publicly funded colleges.
- Government should also develop guidelines/measures to ensure the accountability of the colleges regarding the recruitment and admission of international students, and the design and delivery of services for their wellbeing.
- The office of the Auditor general of Ontario should conduct yearly audits to assess if the public colleges are following recruitment guidelines and providing adequate services to address international students’ diverse needs.

### **5.2.1 Changing Recruitment Strategies**

- Before partnering with any recruitment agencies, colleges should provide training to their staff and develop strict guidelines regarding their code of conduct. Colleges should also take immediate action to investigate if there are complaints against the staff of the recruitment agencies.
- Public colleges should eliminate/phase out agreements with recruitment agencies and seek opportunities to independently recruit and admit international students and should implement transparent practices to ensure that potential students have access to current and accurate information regarding language, program, and application requirements.
- It is also necessary for public colleges to diversify the source countries of international students to enhance multicultural perspective.

### **5.2.3 Replacing Business Model with an Equity Model**

- Public colleges need to revise their internationalization policy to prioritize the wellbeing of international students, to acknowledge their challenges in Canada, to highlight the available services at the colleges.
- Colleges should make tuition fees more affordable for international students and create need and merit based financial aid options (bursaries and scholarships) for international students.
- More financial assistance for refugee students is required. The government should provide financial support to help the expansion of the Student Refugee Program to include more college-level sponsorships.

### **5.2.4 Addressing Information Gaps**

- Public colleges need to develop a comprehensive ‘information platform’ for current and future international students from where they can get reliable information on admission, academic life, employment, housing, immigration and available services and support programs, etc.
- The platform should also have space for pre-arrival and post-graduation engagement with international students. Pre-arrival information is critical to counter the misinformation or potential exploitation by third party recruiters and consultants. Post graduation information is essential for professional and career networking.

### **5.2.5 Mending Policy Gaps**

- Federal and provincial governments and public colleges need to recognize the connection between education and immigration and create realistic policies and programs that address this connection and facilitate transition/retention of international college students.
- The provincial government and colleges should engage with employers, inform them about the skills and potentials of international students and graduates, and encourage them to hire from this talented pool of workers. These efforts will facilitate their study to work transition as well as address Toronto’s labour shortage in the semi-skilled and skilled sector.
- The government should make post-graduate work permits renewable. The current timeline of the work permit (from eight months to three years) is not realistic for international graduates to obtain a job in a relevant field and gather required employment experience for permanent residency.
- As the two-step immigration is becoming the norm, there is a need at the policy level for re-examining the division between temporary and permanent migrants in relation to accessing services because all migrants need social services to live and work in Canada, particularly international students who are considered as ‘ideal’ future immigrants in the immigration policy.

### **5.2.6 Mending Service Gaps**

- Public colleges should conduct regular inventories to identify the challenges and needs of international students with diverse demographic and social-economic backgrounds and adjust their services according to students' needs.
- The students attending colleges might have different concerns and needs than those attending universities and these differences will need to be accommodated.
- Ontario public colleges should standardize their services and support programs so that all students attending these colleges have access to equal/similar types of services.
- Colleges should provide academic services to international students through the International Student Offices and pay a small fee (a portion of tuition fees) to settlement provider organizations so that these organizations can directly provide employment, language, health, immigration services and other social services to international students.
- Government should allocate additional funding for settlement organizations so that they can develop and sustain the service infrastructure (staff and resources) to serve international students.
- Include international students and student organizations in the design and delivery of the services to incorporate their views and voices. This would include programs that support vulnerable groups such as refugee, female, and racialized international students.
- Along with general support to facilitate international students' social and economic integration, the partnership needs to be prepared to cope with emerging challenges, such as a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic that disproportionately affected international students.
- The services, particularly enhanced language and employment training and networking opportunities need to continue to be made available to international students after their graduation so that they can successfully integrate into the labour market. Making postgraduate work permit holders eligible for settlement services is essential.

### **5.2.7 Developing Targeted Services**

- Adopt intervention strategies, such as internationalization of the curriculum, faculty training and development, and intercultural co-curricular activities to enhance an inclusive learning environment.
- Provide culturally adapted academic services that take into consideration ethnolinguistic and religious differences, mental health literacy and the impacts of cross-cultural experiences of international students.

- Develop programs to pair international and domestic students through cultural events, student clubs, volunteer programs and peer mentoring. These programs will help students develop respect for cultural diversity and increase their awareness and capacity to analyze social issues from different perspectives. Addressing issues of stereotyping, discrimination and racism should be a priority of such efforts.
- Develop a mentorship program engaging graduated and current international students. This could assist with the orientation of new students as well as decreasing stress and culture shock. This will also be a source of support for students without a strong cultural community or family support in Canada.
- Introduce Occupation Specific Language Training (OSLT) for international students so that they learn the language and communication skills to understand workplace culture, interact with their co-workers and network effectively.
- Make counselling services available to international students with counsellors trained in cross-cultural competencies to assess the social and cultural factors that affect international students' mental health.
- Organize workshops, presentations, and networking sessions to introduce international students and graduates to career opportunities and tailored job application training and help local employers and business leaders become acquainted with them.
- Create on and off-campus work opportunities and provide internships and co-op positions in career-related fields to help international students enhance their work experience and develop their occupation-specific skill. This will improve their prospects for labour market integration after graduation. work-integrated learning opportunities.
- Develop workshops to inform international students about their social rights, tenant rights and labour rights. Knowing rights will help reduce their vulnerability, stress and anxiety and help them become more assertive.
- Provide information and services to help international students deal with immigration related paperwork, changes in immigration policies, study and work permit applications, post-graduate work permits and permanent residency.
- Build community partnerships with civic society and local non-profit groups to strengthen capacity building and address broader international student concerns.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

A few weeks before the publication of this report, publicly funded colleges in Ontario announced that they are introducing a new set of rules to protect and support international students. The new strategy will include a wide range initiative - from program marketing and admission; to requiring recruiters to complete a recognized training program; to comprehensive orientation and post-

graduation services to assist international students' settlement ([Keung 2023](#)). While it will take weeks or months to know the details of these initiatives and their outcomes, it is indeed a positive turn after a long period of anticipation and despair. We hope that the federal and provincial governments will soon recognize the need for comprehensive settlement services for international students to enable a smooth transition towards their full integration in the Canadian labour market and society. This study demonstrates that international students need greater support from colleges, service providers, communities, and all levels of governments during and after their studies in Canada, and as they seek employment and permanent Canadian residence. Since the current federal government wants to maintain high levels of immigration to address labour shortage and the international student strategy aims to make them a major source of talent in Canada, supporting their integration will help the government achieve its policy objectives. Supporting international college students' transition and integration is not only a win-win situation for Canada but also essential for safeguarding Canada's reputation as one of the best destinations in the world for higher education.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Organization of the Bibliography

The selected literature is organized into three sections based on the type of publications. Section A includes peer-reviewed publications (journal articles, books, book chapters and MA & doctoral dissertations). A total of 156 peer-reviewed publications are included in this section. Based on the topics/main themes of the publications, Section A is further organized into three subsections. Publications in the first sub-section (1A) are focused on the policies, practices, and challenges facing international students in Canada. Most publications in this group discussed postsecondary institutions in general without differentiating between universities and colleges, while a few mentioned both universities and colleges in the discussion. This section is useful to understand the broader trends, issues, debates, challenges, and needs of international students in Canada and contextualize the ICE study. The second subsection (2A) contains all publications that are focused on the college sector and international students attending colleges in Canada. Most of the publications are focused on Ontario's public colleges which offer valuable information for the ICE study on international students attending the Toronto area public colleges. Finally, all publications on the university sector and international students attending universities in Canada are grouped under the third subsection (3A). Section B contains 65 research reports and policy reports, and Section C holds 34 news reports and social media posts. These two sections are not further divided into subgroups because most of these publications discussed international students in Canada in general, often implying both university and college students.

### Section A: Peer Reviewed Publications

#### 1A: Policies, Practices, and Challenges facing International Students in Canada

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