

International Students and Ontario's Private Career Colleges: An Analysis of Policy and Practice

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In January 2024, the federal government implemented policy changes related to international education, reducing international student study permits and ultimately prompting the Ontario provincial government to halt new applications to private career colleges (PCCs). According to the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, there were over 1,500 registered PCCs in Canada in 2023, and over half (780) of which were in Ontario. Research into the relationship between international students and PCCs in Ontario can help guide policymakers' and educators' future decisions regarding study permit allocations.

Research Questions and Methodology

This study aimed to understand the experiences and challenges of international students at Ontario PCCs in 2023, focusing on government regulation and the transparency of information and services provided. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are private career colleges established and regulated in Ontario?
2. How transparent and accessible is information to potential students, including international students?
3. What student support and services are provided to students in the PCC sector, including international students?

Researchers collected and analyzed four data sources: policy documents across ten provinces (with an emphasis on Ontario); interviews with policymakers and regulators from four colleges; an informational audit of 174 Ontario PCC websites; a 26-item questionnaire on student services for Ontario PCC representatives with an 18.4% response rate; and follow-up interviews with representatives from four Ontario PCCs.

Findings and Recommendations

Interviewees from the PCC sector expressed a lack of trust in the government, as policies and procedures were not seen to be properly enforced, mainly due to government understaffing. For example, one representative from the PCC sector reported having to wait approximately six months for minor changes in their program structures, and another noted they had been waiting two years for approval to move their mode of delivery online. In addition to long wait times, PCCs were required to undergo inspections from the Ministry of Colleges, Universities,

Research Excellence and Security, but the inspections were usually delayed and inconsistent, with random and irregular visits. PCC representatives suggested that these compliance policies should not be identical for all colleges, instead focusing on those that have historically been higher risks for non-compliance.

Most PCCs in the questionnaire sample did offer some form of student support, such as orientation, opportunities for student networking and work-integrated learning. A smaller percentage of PCCs offered supports such as English-language support (56%) and assigned academic advisors (40%). However, there was limited information on student support provided on their websites. Eighty-five percent of Ontario PCC websites examined did not provide all admission requirement details, 57% did not post any tuition fee information and only 22% had international-student-specific tuition information. Forty-two percent provided housing information but most of it was limited to links to housing options. There was an overall lack of precision and transparency of information for international students on Ontario PCC websites.

Ninety-two percent of the PCCs who responded to the questionnaire showed interest in recruiting international students in the future, including 71% that did not enroll any international students in 2023. Of that 92%, 75% were large PCCs (with more than 100 students enrolled). PCC representatives told researchers that the enrollment of international students brings new, diverse student experiences into the classroom that benefit all students. They also argued that international graduates of PCCs should be eligible for temporary work permits after graduation.