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# Examining the Impact of Government Incentives on the Decisions of Ontario College Applicants

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The Ontario government offers financial incentives to encourage applications to and enrollment in postsecondary programs tied to areas of labour market demand, many of which are offered by publicly assisted colleges. The Bridging Educational Grant in Nursing (BEGIN) program, for example, seeks to address the province’s nursing shortage by providing financial support for personal support workers (PSWs) and registered practical nurses (RPNs) enrolled in programs that ladder to more advanced certifications (PSW to RPN or registered nurse [RN], and RPN to RN) (Bridging Educational Grant in Nursing Program, n.d.; Ontario Nurses’ Association, 2024). Similarly, the Personal Support Worker Incentive provides financial support to PSW students in an effort to increase the number of PSWs in the province and connect long-term care residents to more hours of direct care (Government of Ontario, 2023d).

Other incentives target specific regions or demographics. The Ontario Learn and Stay Grant covers tuition and associated costs for students in Northern, Southwestern and Eastern Ontario who commit to remaining in the region after graduating (Government of Ontario, 2025c). The Better Jobs Ontario program offers financial assistance to those who may face challenges finding stable jobs, such as gig workers, youth and those enrolled in social assistance programs (Government of Ontario, 2024; Government of Ontario, 2025e). Except for the PSW incentive, each of these programs may be available to both college and university students, provided they meet relevant eligibility criteria.<sup>1</sup>

This brief explores the impact of government financial incentives on the application and enrollment decisions of prospective college students. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) analyzed results from the 2023-24 Ontario College Application Services (OCAS) Applicant Experience Survey (AES), in which applicants were asked about their awareness of each incentive and whether and how these programs influenced the academic programs they applied to. Our analysis represents an important first step in understanding how government incentives increase learners’ interest and enrollment in corresponding college programs. It also offers insight into how government could strengthen the impact of incentives by increasing awareness among prospective applicants. Findings from our analysis could be strengthened with more

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<sup>1</sup> The PSW incentive is available to students enrolled in eligible Ontario PSW training programs; these are offered by publicly assisted colleges, Indigenous Institutes, private career colleges and district school boards (Ontario Health, 2026).



data on how socioeconomic, demographic and other factors affect application and enrollment decisions for targeted programs.

## Background

Four incentive programs were included in OCAS’s 2023-24 AES questions. Table 1 provides an overview of the programs. See Appendix A for more information, including which government ministries fund and administer each incentive and the expenses they cover.

**Table 1**

*Overview of Ontario PSE Incentive Programs*

Program	Date Announced <sup>2</sup>	Target Audience and Funding Source
Better Jobs Ontario (BJO)	Originally introduced as Second Career, was renamed Better Jobs Ontario in <a href="#">April 2022</a>	Supports unemployed, under-employed and low-income individuals including gig workers, youth and those receiving Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program funding with workforce training for in-demand occupations (Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, 2025).  Funded by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development; administered in partnership with the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES) (Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, n.d.).
Personal Support Worker Incentive (PSW)	<a href="#">November 2023</a>	Addresses staffing shortages in long-term care (LTC) homes and home- and community-care sectors across Ontario. Targets PSW students and recent graduates who commit to work in eligible LTC or

<sup>2</sup> Each incentive was still active at the date of publishing.



		<p>homecare organizations (Government of Ontario, 2023d).</p> <p>Funded by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Long-Term Care; administered in partnership with Ontario Health (Ontario Health, 2026).</p>
Bridging Education Grant in Nursing Program (BEGIN)	<u>October 2021</u>	<p>Addresses staffing shortages in Ontario’s nursing sector by assisting PSWs and RPNs in advancing to RPN or RN roles. Eligible participants must commit to working in LTC or home- and community-care sectors in Ontario following graduation (Government of Ontario, 2025a).</p> <p>Funded by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Long-Term Care; administered in partnership with the Registered Practical Nurses Association of Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2023c).</p>
Ontario Learn and Stay Grant (OLSG)	<u>March 2022</u>	<p>Supports students in priority postsecondary programs across underserved regions in Northern, Southwestern and Eastern Ontario. The grant targets workforce shortages in in-demand healthcare professions and encourages graduates to work in the same region after graduation (Government of Ontario, 2025c).</p> <p>Funded by MCURES and administered through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) (MCURES, n.d.).</p>

All of these incentives provide funding to Ontario learners either directly or indirectly through institutions or employers. Three of the programs focus on educational costs (e.g., tuition, fees and books); the BEGIN and BJO incentives provide additional funding for some non-educational expenses, such as housing and transportation. The PSW Incentive uses a different approach: Funding is offered during a students’ clinical



placement, with bonus funding for work and regional commitments, rather than funding to cover educational costs.

The incentives attempt to address urgent labour market gaps in Ontario, with three focused on health-related professions (OLSG, PSW and BEGIN). Each also seeks to promote graduates' commitment to the field, with funding attached to post-graduate time in a related professional position. The OLSG adds the commitment to working in underserved regions, a requirement that can help keep learners in their home communities following graduation or recruit learners to communities outside large urban centres. Two of the programs, BJO and BEGIN, focus on upskilling for more stable employment and/or bridging to more advanced roles in a specific field.

## Research Questions and Methodology

HEQCO analyzed a subset of questions from the 2023-24 OCAS AES to gauge the impact of government incentives on applications to and enrollment in college programs tied to areas of labour market demand. Our exploration was guided by the following research questions:

1. How aware are applicants of government incentives that encourage applications to and enrollment in targeted college programs?
  - a. How does awareness vary by program and applicant age?
2. How do government incentives targeting specific fields of study affect the application and enrollment decisions of prospective college students in Ontario?

HEQCO used Stata 18 to conduct basic descriptive analysis of responses to a subset of AES survey questions.<sup>3</sup> In addition, OCAS linked AES survey data to confirmation and enrollment records for those individuals who completed the questions we analyzed

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<sup>3</sup> Q5: Were you aware of any of the following provincial government incentives targeting specific programs of study? Select all that apply: Ontario Learn and Stay Grant, Personal Support Worker Incentive, Bridging Educational Grant in Nursing, Better Jobs Ontario (n = 2,266). Q6: If you had known about government financial incentives targeting specific programs of study, would that have affected your decision to apply? (n = 1,011); Q7: To what extent did government financial incentives affect your decision to apply to your program of study? (n = 2,244); Q8: Would you have applied to your program of study if these government incentives had not been available? (n = 838).



(Table 1). Our analysis included enrollment records because enrollment is the stronger indicator that an individual actually began their confirmed choice of program.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2**

*Breakdown of AES Sample Dataset, with Links to Confirmation and Enrollment Records*

Total AES survey respondents	10,025
Linked AES survey and confirmation records	8,282
Linked AES survey and enrollment records	6,337
<b>Linked AES survey, confirmation and enrollment records for respondents to subset of questions related to government incentives (study sample)</b>	<b>2,312</b>

Analysis was limited by two factors. First, survey completion was voluntary, and only a subset of respondents completed the survey questions we analyzed; as a result, possible sample and self-selection bias prevent us from generalizing about findings. Second, applicant decision making is complex and may involve overlapping socioeconomic and demographic factors, such as age, location, current employment, current income and family structure (Pizarro Millian, 2022). Data on these factors were not available in our dataset.

## Findings

### Applicants' Awareness of Incentive Programs

Many AES respondents in our sample were unaware of the incentive programs included in the survey. While just over half (55%) were aware of at least one incentive, only 30% were aware of more than one and just 9% were aware of three or more. Applicants' awareness varied by program: Awareness was low for the BJO (11%), PSW (12%) and BEGIN (17%) incentives,<sup>5</sup> though somewhat higher for the OLSG (38%). The OLSG is

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<sup>4</sup> The difference between the confirmation and enrollment records for respondents to the question, "Did you apply to any high-priority programs?" was 17%, reminding us that the applicant decision-making process does not conclude until the student sets foot on campus.

<sup>5</sup> Lack of awareness of the incentive programs does not necessarily entail lack of interest in the incentivized programs of study. About 16% of the respondents who indicated that they had not heard of any of the four incentive programs (n=1029) ultimately enrolled in incentivized programs.



applicable to a wider range of programs and career interests, which may explain higher awareness rates. Further, government administers the OLSG through institutions, who use it to offset tuition and other educational costs (Government of Ontario, 2023a). Institutions may, as a result, seek to drive OLSG awareness through their recruitment efforts for targeted programs.

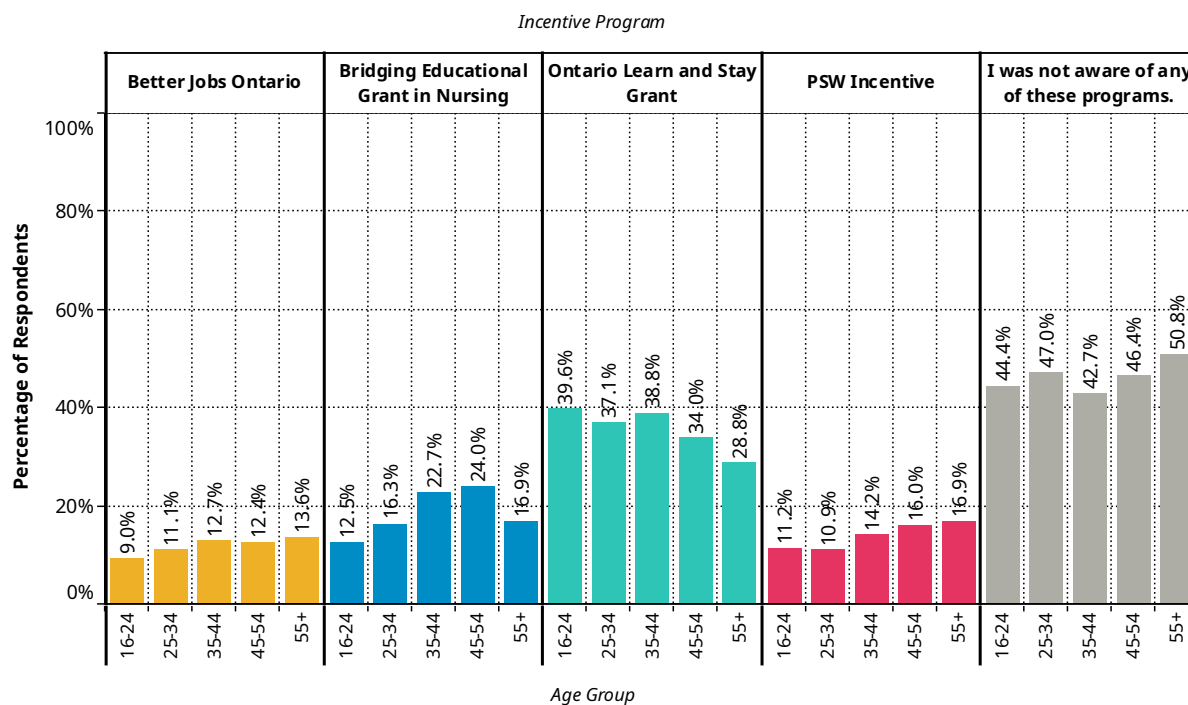
OLSG awareness was particularly strong for applicants who live in regions with closer proximity to funding-eligible institutions and programs (Northern, Southwestern and Eastern Ontario). For example, while 38% of survey respondents from our full sample (i.e., across Ontario) were aware of the OLSG, 59% of applicants from Northeast Ontario, 63% of applicants from Northwest Ontario and 50% of applicants from Kingston-Pembroke indicated awareness of the OLSG.

Incentive program awareness also varied by applicants' age (Figure 1). Awareness of the OLSG, for example, was higher among younger applicants: 40% of those aged 16–24 were aware of this program, compared to 34% of those aged 45–54 and 28% of those aged 55+. Awareness of the PSW and BEGIN incentives, in contrast, was higher among some older applicants: 11% of PSW applicants aged 16–24 were aware of this program, compared to 16% of those aged 45–54 and 17% of those aged 55+. For the BEGIN incentive, 23% of those aged 35–44 and 24% of those aged 45–54 were aware, compared to 16% of those aged 25–34 and 13% of those aged 16–24.



**Figure 1**

*Ontario Public College Applicant Awareness of Government Financial Incentives, by Incentive and Age Group, 2023-24*



Source: OCAS 2023-24 Applicant Experience Survey, Q5: “Were you aware of any of the following provincial government incentives targeting specific programs of study? Select all that apply.”

Note: n = 2,293. Subtotals by category will exceed 100% because Q5 was a ‘select all’ question; some respondents in a given category (e.g., diploma) may have selected more than one response option (e.g., incentive).

Age-related awareness results for the PSW and BEGIN incentives are likely related to the characteristics of program audiences and enrollees. Most PSWs in Ontario’s healthcare sector are aged 35 or older (Government of Ontario, 2020); this suggests these training programs may attract older applicants. The BEGIN program is aimed at working healthcare professionals looking to upskill and change careers, which may account for greater awareness rates among older applicants.



## Awareness Impacts on Learners' Program Application and Enrollment Decisions

The incentives we analyzed positively influenced application decisions for nearly two-thirds of survey respondents who were aware of them: 37% indicated that the incentives influenced their decisions “a great deal,” and 26% were influenced “somewhat.” However, among applicants aware of an incentive tied to their program of study, nearly half (43%) said they still would have applied *without* the incentive; only 25% said they would not have applied, and 32% were unsure.<sup>6</sup> These data suggest that while incentives drive some learners' application decisions, many are motivated by other factors, such as field of study and career goals (Crocker et al., 2024; Crocker et al., 2025). Socioeconomic and demographic factors may play a role in application decisions as well.

The impact of incentives on survey respondents' application decisions also differed according to age (Figure 2). Older applicants were more influenced by the incentives we analyzed, with approximately half reporting they were influenced “a great deal.” Applicants aged 45–54 and 55+ were less inclined to apply without incentives: 26% and 25%, respectively, indicated they would not have applied without one. In contrast, 41% of applicants aged 16–24 indicated the incentives had no influence on their decision, and 51% of these respondents indicated they still would have applied without an incentive.

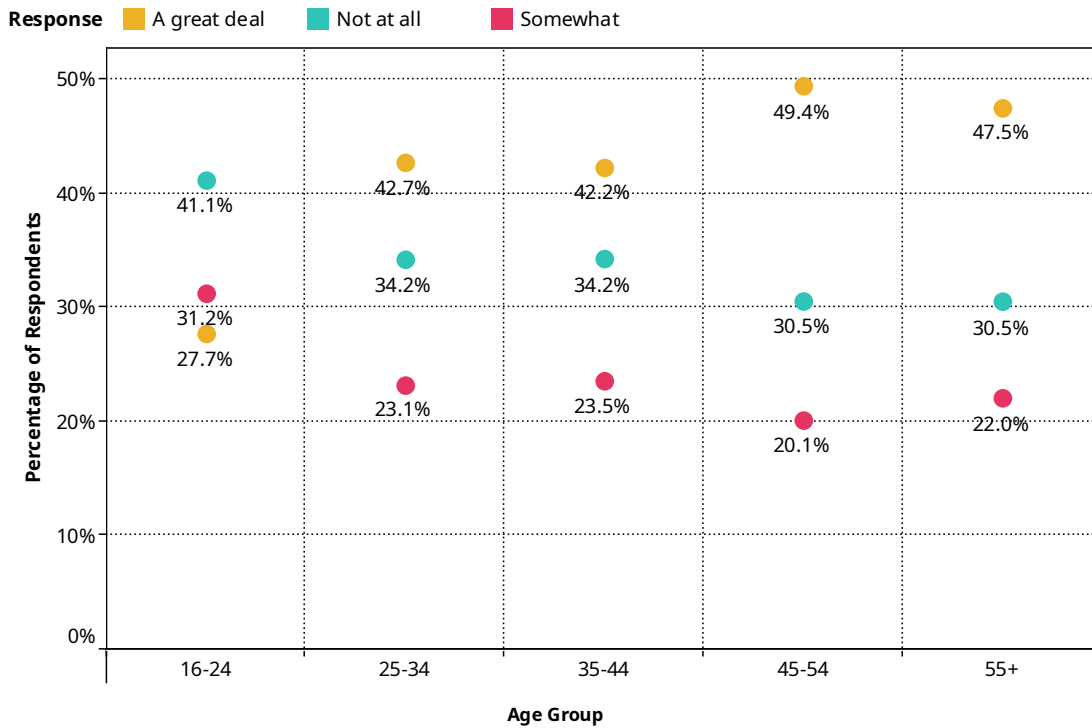
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<sup>6</sup> Notably, 32 % of applicants who were unaware of incentives said knowing about them would have influenced their application decisions, while 33% in this group were unsure.



**Figure 2**

*Self-reported Influence of Government Financial Incentives on Ontario Public College Applicant Decisions, by Incentive and Age Groups, 2023-24*



Source: OCAS 2023-24 Applicant Experience Survey, Q7: “To what extent did government financial incentives affect your decision to apply to your program of study?”

Note: n = 2,271. Subtotals by category may not equal exactly 100% due to rounding.

Differences in incentives’ influence by age may stem, in part, from added financial and family responsibilities older applicants often face (Kerr, 2011). Government incentives were particularly effective among respondents who intended to rely on other sources of financial aid to finance their education. Some respondents indicated that non-OSAP financial awards from their college were “very influential” to their application decisions.<sup>7</sup> Within this group, 46% said incentives affected their application decisions “a great deal,”

<sup>7</sup> The 2023-24 OCAS AES included a question on which funding source(s) applicants intended to use to finance their education.



and another 42% indicated that a lack of government incentives would also have affected their decisions.

Some incentive programs appeared to have a greater impact on applicants' enrollment decisions. Only 16% of respondents aware of the BEGIN incentive, for example, went on to enroll in a corresponding academic program (i.e., a program for which the incentive was designed to increase applications and enrollment, such as a PSW-to-RPN bridging program). For those aware of the OLSG and PSW incentives, enrollment in a corresponding program was higher: More than one third (37% and 41%, respectively) enrolled.

## Discussion and Conclusion

HEQCO's analysis of data from the 2023-24 OCAS AES suggests that, overall, the incentives we analyzed were not well known by prospective college students. Among respondents who were aware of these incentives, however, a majority noted that they positively influenced their application decisions. These initiatives can open pathways to postsecondary education for individuals who might not have been financially able to attend otherwise, allowing them to enhance their education, further their careers and make important contributions to Ontario's labour market.

AES survey data also showed important differences in awareness and influence by incentive and applicants' region and age. These differences highlight the need for targeted program outreach and advertisement. Government can help ensure program information reaches interested learners by working with partners across the public and private sectors, including colleges, employers and community agencies. Stronger awareness can help ensure the success of incentive initiatives and support government's goals for strengthening the pipeline of students in high-demand fields across Ontario.

This study offers an important first step in understanding the impact of government incentives on learners' application and enrollment decisions. Further evaluation would require additional data from and interviews with MCURES and other government stakeholders. A thorough analysis of the OLSG, for example, would require extensive collaboration with OSAP, given the sensitivity of the financial data involved and the importance of regional analyses for determining the effectiveness of the program. BJO



would require yet another methodology and partnership due to the program's intersections with employment and social assistance services under the purview of the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. Data on whether students satisfy incentive program requirements (e.g., remaining in a region for the specified time) would be essential to measuring impact as well.

Future research can also investigate the complex factors that influence applicants' decision making. For example, prospective students may be motivated by preferences for field of study, career, location or French-language instruction. Socioeconomic and demographic factors, such as family income and structure, may also play a role. Understanding the larger context surrounding incentives, including student outcomes and retention rates for new professionals in targeted programs, would bring greater clarity as well.



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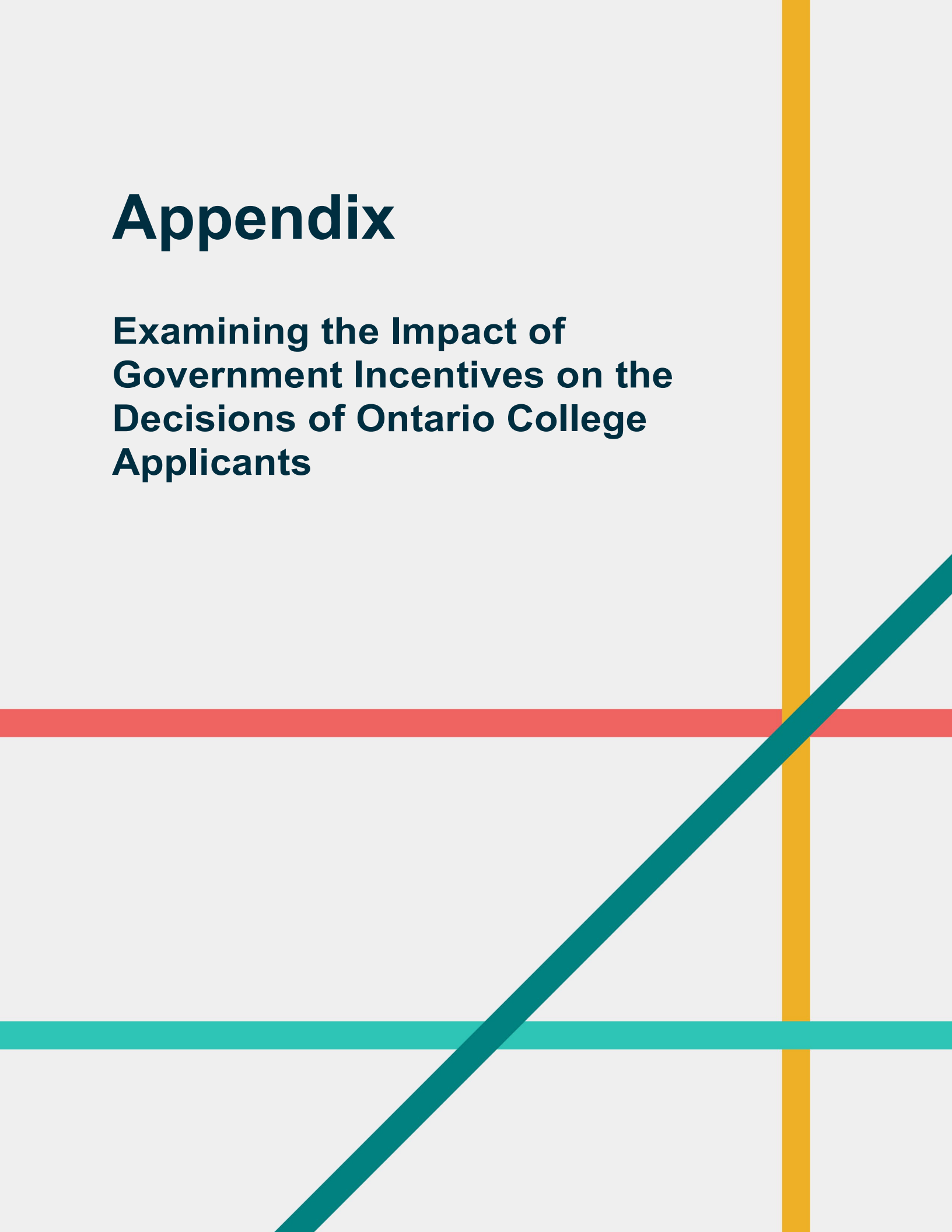
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# Appendix

**Examining the Impact of  
Government Incentives on the  
Decisions of Ontario College  
Applicants**



# Appendix A

**Table A1**

*Description of Ontario Postsecondary Incentive Programs*

Program	Date Announced	Government Pledge	Target Audience	Incentive Type
Better Jobs Ontario (BJO)	Originally introduced as Second Career, was renamed Better Jobs Ontario in April 2022 with further program updates announced in 2025	<p>Additional \$50 million investment announced in 2025 (Government of Ontario, 2025b). Funding of up to \$28,000–\$35,000 per participant.</p> <p>Funded by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. Administered in partnership with MCURES.</p>	Supports unemployed, under-employed and low-income individuals including gig workers, youth and those receiving Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program funding. Focuses on helping Ontarians facing challenges in securing stable employment re-enter the workforce through training for in-demand occupations (including microcredentials, fast-track re-entry programs) (Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, 2025).	Skills training and financial assistance covering tuition, books, supplies, transportation, and a basic living allowance (up to \$28,000 or \$35,000 for longer programs). Additional funding available for childcare, disability supports, and costs of living away from home (Government of Ontario, 2025e).

<p>Personal Support Worker (PSW) Incentive</p>	<p>November 23, 2023</p>	<p>\$300 million over three years to attract and retain PSWs in LTC homes, home care and community care (Government of Ontario, 2023d).</p> <p>Funded by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Long-Term Care. Administered in partnership with Ontario Health.</p>	<p>Addresses staffing shortages in LTC homes and home- and community-care sectors across Ontario. Targets PSW students and recent graduates who commit to work in eligible LTC or home-care organizations. Additional incentives for those relocating to rural, remote or northern regions (especially &gt;100 km relocation) (Government of Ontario, 2025d).</p>	<p>Clinical placement stipend: up to \$5,440 for PSW students during placement in LTC homes, home care or community care (Government of Ontario, 2025d).</p> <p>Recruitment/commitment bonus: \$10,000 for students who commit to 12 months full-time work.</p> <p>Rural/remote/northern incentive: \$10,000 (plus relocation) for working 12 months in rural/remote/northern settings.</p>
<p>Bridging Education Grant in Nursing (BEGIN) Program</p>	<p>October 2021</p>	<p>Up to \$6,000/year (max \$15,000) for students completing PSW-to-RPN bridging programs.</p> <p>Up to \$10,000/year (max \$30,000) for students completing RPN-to-RN or PSW-to-RN bridging programs.</p>	<p>Addresses staffing shortages in Ontario's nursing sector by assisting PSWs and RPNs in advancing to RPN or RN roles. Eligible participants must be Canadian citizens or PR-holders enrolled in or accepted to accredited bridging programs and commit to working in LTC or Home &amp; Community Care sectors in Ontario following graduation.</p>	<p>Tuition reimbursement grant (non-repayable if service commitment met). You pay up front, submit receipts, get reimbursed (Bridging Educational Grant in Nursing Program, n.d).</p> <p>Covers tuition and mandatory ancillary fees for the bridging programs.</p> <p>Some additional supports for eligible students (\$5,000/year) for non-tuition costs.</p>

		<p>Additional wraparound supports up to \$5,000/year (Bridging Educational Grant in Nursing Program, n.d).</p> <p>Funded by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Long-Term Care. Administered in partnership with the Registered Practical Nurses Association of Ontario.</p>		<p>The program is limited to eligible bridging students, not all nursing students.</p> <p>Graduates must complete a certain number of hours (per year/funded) for every academic year or portion of a year for which BEGIN funding was received.</p>
Ontario Learn and Stay Grant (OLSG)	March 2022	<p>\$61 million over three years (2023 announcement, later expansions up to \$88 million for 2026) (Government of Ontario, 2023b; Government of Ontario, 2024).</p> <p>Funded by MCURES and administered through OSAP.</p>	<p>Supports students in priority postsecondary programs (practical nursing, BSc in nursing, paramedic, and medical laboratory technology/science) across underserved regions in Northern, Southwestern and Eastern Ontario. The grant targets workforce shortages in in-demand healthcare professions and encourages graduates to work in the same region after graduation.</p>	<p>Non-repayable grant (unless student fails to meet the service commitment — in which case converted to a loan), covering tuition, compulsory fees, books and educational costs (Government of Ontario, 2025c).</p> <p>Recipients must work six months in the study region per funded year (e.g., 24 months for four years of funding).</p>