

Strengthening Canada's Skilled Workforce

Helping International College Students Transition From Study to Work

How can post-secondary institutions maximize the potential of international students?

International college students tend to have poorer employment outcomes than their Canadian-born peers. Except for those in STEM fields, international college graduates earn 15 to 23 per cent less after graduation.¹ They face multiple labour market barriers, including challenges with networking, language, discrimination, and job interviews.

To understand how colleges can innovate to help improve the employment outcomes of international college students, we:

- surveyed 1,002 final-year international college students and recent international college graduates;
- interviewed 42 final-year international college students and recent graduates and 42 public college staff working in international student services, career services, and experiential learning.

We focused on colleges in Ontario and British Columbia, where most international college students study.

What works

Benefits of career services

We found that participation in career services was linked to several positive employment outcomes for international college students and graduates, including:

- increased likelihood of having Canadian work experience;
- higher levels of job satisfaction;
- greater alignment between their job and field of study and career goals.

Resumé/CV workshops and interview assistance are the career services valued most by international college students and graduates.

Effectiveness of work-integrated learning

International college students and graduates who participated in work-integrated learning (WIL) report feeling more prepared for the job market. Compared with their counterparts who hadn't participated in WIL, they are more likely to report that:

- their education and training are sufficient to get a job;
- they have enough Canadian work experience to get a job;
- they feel optimistic about their chances of getting a job now or in the future.

The international college students and graduates we interviewed said that participating in WIL provided them with:

- important Canadian work experience related to their field of study;
- valuable references for future employment;
- full-time employment opportunities, in some cases.

¹ International college students who earn certificates in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) earn more one year after graduation than their Canadian counterparts.

Opportunities for improvement

Embed career education into academic programs.

Despite the clear benefits of career services, over a third of international college students we surveyed have not used them. Common barriers for international college students include:

- lack of time, especially given high levels of financial, settlement and academic stress;
- difficulty accessing information on relevant programs and services.

Integrating career education into academic programs or offering career readiness modules would lessen the burden on international students to seek out career services and help ensure equitable access to employment supports for all students.

Expand formal peer mentorship programs for international students.

Friends and classmates are an important source of career support for more than a third of international college students. Colleges can leverage peer support networks to create formal peer mentorship programs within career services. These programs can ensure that students receive consistent and accurate information while offering professional development and paid opportunities for international student mentors.

Demystify the hiring process for employers.

Overcoming employer biases and confusion around immigration regulations is a major hurdle for international college students and graduates looking for work. Colleges and polytechnics can take a proactive role in helping employers understand immigration regulations related to hiring international talent. Many college staff we interviewed reported that employers have misconceptions about these rules, which can deter them from hiring international college students and graduates.

Through targeted training sessions and resources, institutions can help demystify the hiring process and share success stories to encourage more employers to engage with international college students.

Highlight the employment benefits of WIL for international college students.

Although WIL participation is linked with better employment outcomes, 45 per cent of the international college students and graduates we surveyed had not participated in WIL.

Transportation and financial challenges can prevent international college students from taking part in WIL. Many placements are inaccessible by public transit, and some require relocating, which is often not feasible for students without a vehicle or the means to move. College staff reported that these barriers disproportionately impact international students compared to domestic students. Some international college students we interviewed also view WIL as financially risky due to the uncertainty of securing a placement and higher program costs.

Colleges can consider doing the following:

- emphasizing the employment benefits of WIL for international students during recruitment and orientation;
- encouraging international students to complete at least one WIL experience before graduation;
- collaborating with employers to offer more WIL opportunities, particularly positions that are accessible or include remote work options;
- offering scholarships or bursaries to help offset financial barriers that hinder WIL participation;
- advocating for government funding for WIL opportunities for international students.

Want to learn more?

Check out our [issue briefing](#) to read more about how international college students use formal and informal employment supports to transition to the workplace.

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