

## Hard lessons: Newcomers and Ontario Private Colleges



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## Executive summary

This report focuses on the experiences of newcomers with private colleges in Ontario. The report relies on the insights of front-line staff of agencies that serve newcomers, and offers their impressions of the newcomer encounter with private colleges: their motivation for seeking out private colleges, recruitment and admissions practices, financial issues, the educational and training process and eventual outcomes.

In order to provide some context, this report also reviews the limited literature that exists relating to private colleges, finding that these largely fall into two categories: either reports of questionable practices among private colleges or industry-sponsored studies heralding the successes of private colleges.

This report was prompted by the numerous anecdotes provided by newcomers about their encounters with private colleges. These emerged during deliberations about how best to support better settlement integration and better labour market outcomes among newcomers, part of the mandate of Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), supported by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. This study was undertaken by the Toronto South LIP.

This report does not purport to be an in-depth investigation. Rather, it seeks to draw attention to what appears to be a continuing pattern of problematic practices, to make reinforce previous policy recommendations and to provide some tools for newcomers and settlement staff, by providing background information about private colleges and some quick tip sheets.

Currently in Ontario, private colleges are not held to the same standards as community colleges or universities. Private colleges offering non-vocational programs, language training, programs less than 40 hours in length, programs costing less than \$1000, professional development programs and hobby courses are not required to be registered. There is no way of knowing how many such non-registered, non-monitored private colleges exist in Ontario.

Registered private colleges may be approved, for the purposes of the Second Career program and the Ontario Student Assistance Program, so that students may apply for financial assistance. Between 2008 and 2010, over half a billion dollars of public financial support was provided to students attending private colleges.

Private colleges in Ontario are not required to produce performance indicators relating to graduation rates, graduate employment, graduate satisfaction and employer satisfaction, as is required of community colleges. Thus,

there is no way of measuring private college outcomes, and no way of assessing the suitability of a program when making choices about education or training.

On the basis of interviews with staff in settlement and employment service programs and with other key informants, a number of common themes emerged:

- Newcomers feel under great pressure to find a job when they arrive to Canada, but often find they need a Canadian credential or upgrade; private colleges are attractive to them because they often have shorter courses and more options when it comes to classroom schedules;
- Among some private colleges, newcomers do not appear to be held to as stringent requirements for English proficiency as is typically the case for post-secondary education, resulting in more admissions of newcomer students whose weaker language skills may lead to poorer learning outcomes;
- In a number of cases, some private colleges appeared to use high-pressure sales techniques in their recruitment process and were not upfront about program fees and the nature of OSAP assistance;
- A number of key informants complained that standards of instruction, curriculum

and facilities were poor in many instances among private colleges and that placement or practicum opportunities appeared either non-existent or inadequate;

- The experience of our key informants has been that newcomers graduating from private colleges have poorer employment outcomes than those graduating from community colleges.

The report concludes with a number of recommendations:

- Given the limited information available about private colleges, that more studies be commissioned to shed light on this sector;
- That more effort be invested in enforcing the laws and regulations currently in place, in particular in relation to the quality of education provided in private colleges;
- That private colleges be required to produce the same key performance indicators as community colleges, such as graduation rates, graduate employment, graduate satisfaction and employer satisfaction;
- That a greater effort be made to assist the broader public to be an informed consumer of educational services.

This report is being released alongside a new resource toolbox to help newcomers.



## Introduction

### *Setting the Stage*

Few of us give much thought to the road-side advertisement offering the educational path to a career, typically citing a lesser known entity with the title “college” or “institute” in its name, often located in the second floor offices of a strip mall. This is the world of private colleges, or private career colleges (private colleges), an alternative educational track, usually used by those seeking a quicker route to specific skills or accreditation, or by those seeking re-training. It is also an option that often attracts newcomers, but which is not without its pitfalls.

You might be more than a little surprised to learn that:

- We have no idea how many such private colleges exist in Ontario, nor how many students may be enrolled in these institutions;
- Only certain private colleges are required to be registered in Ontario; of these, there exist approximately 470, with some 650 campuses, serving over 60,000 students a year;
- While private colleges receive no direct funding from governments (unlike our universities and community colleges), students may be eligible for government

assistance to pay for their tuition, which over one three-year period in Ontario accounted for over half a billion dollars of support.<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago, private colleges were the subject of several media reports highlighting various unsavory practices and profiling numerous very unhappy students. This resulted in a number of investigations, which eventually led the Ontario government to introduce new rules to improve this sector.

This report has been prepared by a consortium of community agencies and public institutions working in the central part of Toronto to enhance the settlement and integration outcomes of newcomers to Canada. We are part of a network of such collaborations across Ontario, called Local Immigration Partnerships, funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

This study arose as a direct result of concerns expressed by staff of our partner agencies regarding what they were learning from their newcomer clients about private colleges. These clients were recounting a set of practices that suggested a pattern among certain private

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<sup>1</sup> Annual Report of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2011. Between 2008 and 2010, a total of almost \$350 million was provided through the Second Career program (a re-training program) and almost \$200 million was provided through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

colleges that included aggressive recruitment methods, dubious assessments and admissions processes, and poor employment outcomes that raised questions about the quality of the instruction and the veracity of the recruitment claims.

This is not an investigative report. Rather, it is an attempt to gather what we have learned about private colleges, to shine a light on the experiences of newcomers with private colleges and to stimulate further inquiry and action. We do not believe that the concerns raised in this report mean that all private colleges are to be held under suspicion, in the same way that we are not proposing that universities and community colleges are without their faults. What this report reflects is a set of concerns that have been voiced repeatedly by staff from various agencies, which suggest to us there is a problem that warrants attention.

These concerns prompted us to assemble what we could learn about private colleges and make it known to a broader audience. By doing so, we hope that newcomers and the agencies serving them can become better informed about choices in the educational services field, and that regulators can engage in more targeted oversight to ensure that all institutions live up to the standards that our legislation expects of them.

### ***Scope and Methodology***

This report relies on a thorough review of the secondary literature on private colleges and an analysis of 22 key informant interviews with frontline staff, including settlement workers and employment counsellors at 16 immigrant serving agencies, as well as two interviews with previous private college management professionals. The interviews were conducted in March-April 2013. All front-line staff interviewees were pre-screened based on the frequency of inquiries they receive from their newcomer clients on private colleges.

We chose to keep our informants anonymous, in the same way that we did not name any private colleges mentioned in our interviews. Our goal here is not to make accusations about a particular private college, but rather to report on what front-line staff were hearing from their clients. We do not presume that this constitutes conclusive evidence of questionable practices, but the frequency with which certain of these practices were cited suggests a strong case for further inquiry and a strong need for ensuring that individuals can make informed choices about their educational options. Reassuring our interviewees that their names would not be used made it more likely that we could assemble an unfiltered account of the experiences of their clients.

Our approach to this report is that of a preliminary exploration. For one, for this stage we had a limited budget and timeframe. For another, we felt that the first step should involve compiling and assessing the information that we could easily assemble from others. Thus, in addition to reviewing the secondary literature, we felt the best sources of information could come from those who work regularly with newcomers, the frontline staff for newcomer services and for employment services. In this way, we could bring together the impressions of frontline staff developed through their contacts with numerous newcomers, learning about the factors that influence the educational choices of newcomers, as well as gain insights about their interactions with private colleges. This would include not only stories about the application process, but also the classroom experience and eventual employment outcomes. Employment counsellors, meanwhile, would also be in a unique position to provide us with a good perspective on how employers assessed private college diplomas or certificates when making their decisions to interview and hire job candidates. It would certainly be a useful insight to acquire the employers' perspective on private college graduates.

The key-informant interviews were designed to collect answers to the following research questions:

## Research Questions

- How do the experiences of Toronto newcomers with private colleges compare to those in community colleges?
- What are the attractions of the various forms of colleges to Toronto newcomers?
- Do Toronto newcomers understand the differences between the various types of colleges (community colleges and private colleges, accredited and non-accredited private colleges)?
- Do any private colleges engage in questionable or deceptive practices when recruiting or screening prospective students or in teaching students? What is the impact of such practices on Toronto newcomers and upon other colleges?
- What tools would help newcomers to understand the Canadian post-secondary education system and their legal and consumer rights?
- How do employers evaluate private colleges when making hiring decisions?
- What are the outcomes for newcomers who enroll in private colleges?

The Interview questions are appended.

## Overview of Private Colleges



### **Background**

Private colleges or private career colleges are independent, privately owned post-secondary institutions that provide career-specific programs. There are approximately 470 registered private colleges in Ontario, with 650 campuses and over 60,000 students.<sup>2</sup> private colleges are attractive to many people who are looking for a quick transition into the work place. Typically, private college programs are condensed, employment-focused and offer flexible registration.

In Ontario, private colleges are governed by the *Private Career Colleges Act, 2005*, which came into force on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006. private

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<sup>2</sup> Annual Report of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2011, p. 250.

colleges offering vocational programs must be registered and have their programs approved by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Program approval requires the submission of detailed descriptions of program performance objectives, curricula, entrance requirements, labour-market needs and physical facilities and equipment, accompanied by assessments by third-party experts. In addition, the Act sets minimum qualification requirements for the instructors such that they must have a minimum of four years of work experience in the vocation involved, or two years of work

experience plus academic credentials such as a Bachelor's degree, community college diploma or apprenticeship certification.

The Act also aims to improve the protection of students' rights. For example, enrolment in a registered private college requires the student and the private college to sign a written enrolment contract that meets the requirements of the Act. private colleges cannot collect more than 20 per cent of the total fees for the program up to a maximum of \$500 before signing a contract. Students have a two-day "cooling off" period after signing the contract to decide if they really want to pursue the program. Moreover, students may seek a full refund of fees paid for a program if a total of more than 10 per cent of the program is

taught by unqualified instructors or if a private college makes certain types of untrue statements for the purpose of convincing prospective students to enroll in the program (including a false or misleading statement, a statement that guarantees admission to or successful completion of the program, employment after graduation or the right to enter Canada or receive a student visa).

private colleges offering non-vocational programs, however, are not required to be registered, and hence are not monitored. These programs include non-vocational programs (that is, training not related to a vocation or a career), language training programs, programs less than 40 hours in length, programs costing less than \$1,000, professional development programs and hobby courses. Anecdotal reports are the only evidence of how many of these non-registered, non-monitored private colleges exist in Ontario, training an unknown number of people.

The Ministry does not fund private colleges directly, however, through its employment training and student assistance programs, it nevertheless provides significant funding to private colleges. As stated in the 2011 annual report of the Auditor General of Ontario, between 2008 and 2010, a total of almost \$350 million was provided through the Second Career programs to an annual average of 13,000

students to pay for their tuition to attend private colleges.<sup>3</sup> In addition, over these same three years, almost \$200 million were provided to an annual average of 9,500 private college students through Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).<sup>4</sup>

While not attracting the same attendance as Ontario's 24 community colleges (with over 200,000 students) and 20 universities (with over 370,000 students), private colleges (with over 60,000 students) are nevertheless a significant sector. Yet there is very little consistent and accurate data regarding private colleges, both in Canada and in Ontario. There is no official published data available nor is any enrollment data collected by Statistics Canada for this sector, which, unfortunately, translates into a lack of quality assurance related information about private colleges.

To ensure high-quality post-secondary education in community colleges, five key performance indicators (KPIs) are required to be produced: graduate employment, graduate satisfaction, employer satisfaction, student satisfaction and graduation rate. private colleges, on the other hand, are not subject to such scrutiny. The Ministry stopped collecting statistics on graduation rates and graduate employment rates for private colleges in 2005.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

Currently, the only quality assurance related information on private colleges, though limited, is OSAP default rates. Presumably a higher default rate means that individuals graduating from these courses were less likely to find suitable employment and thus were unable to repay their OSAP loans. The following table summarizes OSAP default rates by types of institutions (universities, community colleges and private colleges) for the last 5 years:

This hardly provides much guidance to prospective students. Given that in 2011 only 132 private colleges were approved for student loans, for the remaining 340 colleges there is no information available for prospective students. Moreover, the fact that a private college program is OSAP eligible does not, in the Ministry's words, "mean that the Ministry endorses the quality of its programs, or that the education it provides will guarantee you

employment or an income sufficient to repay your student loans. It is up to you to investigate the program you plan to take."<sup>5</sup>

<b>Comparison of OSAP default rates by educational institution, 2007-2011, Ontario</b>					
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Universities	4.3%	3.9%	4.0%	3.7%	3.6%
Community Colleges	11.0%	10.6%	11.0%	10.6%	10.5%
private colleges	17.5%	18.0%	15.1%	13.0%	15.2%

There is a clear pattern in the default rates by institutions: relatively low among university graduates, higher for community college grads and highest for graduates of private colleges. Whether that is a consequence of the relative merit of the degrees or a function of who enrolls in which institution, or some other explanation, is not known, but as far as student outcomes go, this is the only measurement we currently have access to.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> <https://osapold.gov.on.ca/cgi-bin/lansaweb?procfun+search+osp+eng>



## ***Private Career Colleges in the Literature***



The literature on private colleges can be grouped into two main groups: “*against private colleges*,” that is, media reports singling out the practices of certain private colleges or “bad apples” and “*for private colleges*,” studies commissioned by the industry, notably either the National Association of Career Colleges or the Ontario Association of Career Colleges, which draw a very different, a very positive, picture of private colleges. The lack of “in-between,” comprehensive and objective research on private colleges creates a confusion for everyone, including many prospective students and in the end hurts the reputation of many respectable private colleges as well.

### **Media reports and Ombudsman investigations.**

The media has reported a steady stream of concerns regarding private career colleges. In 2006 the government of China released a statement “about unscrupulous operators and substandard programs at some of Canada’s

private colleges.”<sup>6</sup> That warning came after many complaints by foreign students about certain schools in Vancouver and Toronto. In 2007, as reported in *Maclean’s* magazine, the *Times of India* cautioned readers about the “perils” of studying in Canada.<sup>7</sup> That alarm emerged as a result of the experience of students attending Vancouver’s Landsbridge University, which was closed in 2007. In 2008, *Maclean’s* magazine reported that the Ontario chapter of the Canadian Federation of Students called for a moratorium on private career colleges.<sup>8</sup> *Maclean’s* quoted CFS-O chairperson Shelley Melanson, who said the private college diplomas “are not worth the paper they are printed on” and that “many of them have been riddled with impropriety.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2009 *The Toronto Star* published its own investigation into private colleges, which showed that the problems around substandard education at some private colleges were indeed widespread. *The Star* quoted one student who paid \$6500 in tuition to be trained in the aesthetics industry but he admitted that he was afraid of treating people. He said he spent only two or three minutes during his training on laser techniques, which can be very dangerous when used by someone who is not well

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Keung, *Toronto Star*, February 15, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Erin Millar, *Maclean’s*, December 24, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Taylor-Vaisey, *Maclean’s*, July 25, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

trained.<sup>10</sup> For the investigation *The Star* interviewed more than two dozen students who said “they lost money to licensed colleges and ended up unskilled, unqualified and unemployed.”<sup>11</sup> The Ministry’s database released to the *Star* showed 2,546 separate issues with career colleges over a two-year period, mostly dealing with licensed colleges. There were also 900 inspection reports over three years. The issues raised in these reports included misleading advertising by a school, a school that had no academic or attendance records on file, and teachers who were not qualified to teach the program. Yet none of this information was available to the public. The undercover reporters who enrolled in two unregistered colleges revealed how the system was abused, including:

- “An unregistered science and technology academy that not only provided grossly inadequate training for employment as a health care personal support worker, but even helped fabricate references and a fake job history;
- An unregulated security guard school, luring applicants with promises of ‘top pay’ for non-existent airport jobs.”<sup>12</sup>

The Ombudsman’s Report, *Too Cool for School*, was also published in 2009. This report examined the case of Bestech Academy, an unregistered private college that the province allowed to continue to operate for two years

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Cribb, *Toronto Star*, September 19, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Toronto Star*, September 20, 2009.

before shutting its doors. Andre Marin, Ombudsman of Ontario stated that “like the *Star*’s reporters, my office’s investigators found the ministry is failing to protect students of private career colleges, licensed or unlicensed.”<sup>13</sup> In conclusion the report raised a concern that “unless there are some fundamental changes in how the Ministry does its business, individuals seeking to better their lives through vocational training will still be at the mercy of ruthless and incompetent illegal operators.”

The Ministry, partly in response to these reports, undertook several commendable initiatives to better protect students,<sup>14</sup> which included:

- establishing a separate Private Career Colleges Branch to strengthen oversight of the sector;
- developing a regulatory framework to allow the Ministry to administer financial penalties to institutions that violate the Act;
- working with professional and regulatory bodies to strengthen awareness of each other’s requirements; and
- significantly increasing enforcement action against unregistered colleges.

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<sup>13</sup> Andre Marin, *The Toronto Star*, September 23, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> See the Annual Report of Auditor General of Ontario, 2011 pp.250-268.

In fact, the Ministry issued over 130 orders to unregulated colleges between August 1, 2009 and March 31, 2011, more than four times as many as in the preceding three-year period. While the Auditor General recognized these improvements, in his 2011 annual report, he concluded that more needs



to be done. For example, the Ministry currently has no procedure for routinely checking to see that private colleges that have been ordered closed actually remain closed. The audit conducted by the Ombudsman's office detected instances where some of these colleges appeared to still be offering courses. In addition, while the Ministry is supposed to consider the financial viability of colleges when it processes the colleges' annual registration applications, the audit found at least one college that posted significant financial losses which had its registration nevertheless renewed without the Ministry's review of its financial viability. The college subsequently closed, costing the provincial Training Completion Assurance Fund more than \$800,000. The report also recommended that the Ministry should collect KPIs for the private colleges.

In spite of the Ministry's efforts to improve the scrutiny of private colleges and the protection

of students, last year, another report emerged of complaints about private colleges. *Maclean's* reported that complaints filed by students about some of Ontario's private colleges alleged harassment from teachers, inadequate instruction and lack of proper equipment.<sup>15</sup> 36 percent of the complaints were about one private college in particular, which operates 16 campuses in the province. The allegations against instructors were very disturbing; for example, one instructor was alleged to be drunk, swearing in class, calling students "baby" and "doll" and only providing half of the instruction hours promised. Another student complained that the program was strictly self-taught and the equipment room had no equipment whatsoever.

In 2010 and 2011 a total of 47 formal complaints on private colleges were made to the Ministry. Compared to the total number of

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<sup>15</sup> *Maclean's*, September 3, 2012.

private college students (60,000), the number of complaints seems to be very small, yet, as our study suggests, the small number of complaints can also be a result of lack of information on complaint procedures rather than the result of student satisfaction.

(It is important to note that community colleges and universities also receive a lot of student complaints. For example, last year, *the Star* reported that 118 graduates won a class action suit against their community college for a course description that promised three credentials it was not qualified to deliver.<sup>16</sup> The issue, clearly, is not the number of complaints but the complaint procedure and the result of such complaints.)

*Industry studies.* While these reports have contributed to the improvements in the oversight of private colleges, it has also hurt the reputation of respectable private colleges. The Ontario Association of Career Colleges has underlined that the problem is about a few bad apples and, under the association’s code, colleges can lose their membership if they have three or more complaints unresolved for one year. While such a procedure is promising, unfortunately more than half of the private colleges are not members of the Association.

The most comprehensive study on private colleges available to date is the Survey of

Canadian Career College Students which was initialized by the National Association of Career Colleges. In 2006, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (the relevant federal government department), in partnership with the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, commissioned R.A. Malatest and Associates to conduct a survey to gather information

NACC		Non-NACC		TOTAL	
Short-term Less than 3 months	Long-term More than 3 months	Short-term Less than 3 months	Long-term More than 3 months	Short-term Less than 3 months	Long-term More than 3 months
3,106	15,285	7,097	13,182	18,391	20,279

concerning students and graduates of private colleges in Canada. The study had three phases and the initial Phase I, an institutional survey, was completed in 2007.

This study<sup>17</sup> divided career colleges into two categories, those that were members of the National Association of Career Colleges (NACC) and those that were not. From their scan, they identified a universe of 2,423 private career colleges in Canada in 2006, of which 441 were members of NACC, leaving 1,982 that were not members. In Ontario, these numbers were 199 NACC-member institutions, and 397 non-NACC institutions. For 2005, this represented some 51,380 students attending NACC private colleges and another 104,727 attending non-NACC private colleges.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Brown, *Toronto Star*, November 21, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> *Survey of Canadian Career Colleges Students – Phase I: Institutional Survey*, pp.3-15.

On average, these schools individually have small numbers of student enrollment: over the entire 2005 year, the average number of students enrolled in a NACC institution was 170, while in a non-NACC institution it was 147.

The following table summarizes the total number of students enrolled in 2005:

**Institutional survey, number of private colleges, by NACC membership and length of term, Canada, 2005**

According to this survey, the breakdown of qualifications held by instructors at private career colleges in Canada in 2006 was as follows:<sup>18</sup>

- Post-graduate degree: 8%
- Undergraduate degree: 15%
- College diploma: 26%
- Grade 12: 23%
- Other qualification: 28%

On average, tuition fees range between \$5,000 and \$10,000 for both NACC (72% with fees in this range) and non-NACC (54%). Another 16% of NACC and 24% of non-NACC have fees over \$10,000.<sup>19</sup>

Phase II of the study, an In-school Student Survey, was completed in 2008. Based on a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.24. These figures for instructors represent a level of educational attainment only slightly higher than that achieved by the general adult population in Canada.

survey of 13,700 students, the student profile can be summarized as follows<sup>20</sup>:

- 72% female (compared to 69% in public post-secondary)
- Median age: 29 years old (for Canadian colleges it is 26 years old)
- 33% of private career college students support a child, compared to 17% for public post-secondary
- In Canada, 13% of career college students were born outside of Canada, while in Ontario the figure is 36% (p. 11); among those not born in Canada, half emigrated since 2000

In terms of students' preferences regarding their education route<sup>21</sup>:

- 72% indicated that their current private college is their preferred choice
- 8% would have liked to have been in a different private college
- 12% would have liked to have been in a community college
- 8% would have liked to have been in university

Mean tuition cost over the length of the program in Ontario was \$15,006.<sup>22</sup> 53% of students rely on government loans as a way of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>20</sup> *Survey of Canadian Career Colleges Students – Phase II: In-school Student Survey*, pp.7-12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.32.

funding their costs, and this source contributes to 44% of the funds they use.<sup>23</sup>

“Compared to students attending private career colleges, public college students have significantly greater resources at their disposal to fund their college education. Thus, public college students, compared to private college students, more commonly have funds from family (59% vs. 26%), personal savings (47% vs. 19%), government scholarships or bursaries (13% vs. 9%) and academic scholarships/bursaries (25% vs. 5%). Public college students are also significantly more likely to draw upon funds generated from working while in school (70% vs. 8%). The high proportion of career college students who were enrolled on a full-time basis can partially explain the level of incidence of in-study employment for this group relative to their public college system counterparts.”<sup>24</sup>

This, however, does not mean that private college students do not work when in school. In fact, 37% of private college students work (compared to 58% of community college students) while attending school. It seems, though, according to the survey, that they tend not to use these employment earnings to finance their education.<sup>25</sup> Why this might be so requires further investigation.

With regards to immigrants,<sup>26</sup> the survey indicated that only 11% of the students surveyed or 1,533 students were recent

immigrants (had immigrated to Canada since the year 2000). Generally, these students had completed some form of post-secondary education prior to entering the private career college system. Almost two-thirds (68%) had some previous post-secondary education, with many holding a college/university diploma or certificate (23%), a Bachelor's (31%) or university degree above Bachelor's level (12%). The high level of education of this group is in sharp contrast to the private career college average, in which only 34% of students had some kind of postsecondary education prior to enrolling in a career college. Looking at Canadian-born students, only 26% enter a career college with a post-secondary degree, while 48% of those immigrating before 2000 have a degree. The education level of recent immigrants is markedly higher than that of both longer-term immigrants and non-immigrants. The proportion of recent immigrants with a university degree (43%) was well above that of other immigrants (20%) or non-immigrants (6%). One can surmise that these students are likely entering the private career college system in order to gain recognition for their foreign credentials (17%). Other reasons cited by this group for enrolling in a career college include to study at a more advanced level in the same field (15%) or to gain practical skills to augment their academic qualifications (11%).

Recent immigrants appear to have roughly the same level of knowledge (or lack of knowledge)

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-44.

as all students about public programs offering financial support for education. Thus, the survey reports those with little or no knowledge of federal (46% of recent immigrants as well as of all students) and provincial loans (46% of recent immigrants and 44% of all students), or of the Registered Education Savings Plan or the Canada Education Savings Grant (57% of recent immigrants and 64% of all students).<sup>27</sup> Yet recent immigrants are not accessing the Canada Student Loans Program at the same rate as other students. Only one in three (30%) have applied for a student loan or are in receipt of a student loan for the current program (31%).

To finance their private career college education, recent immigrants are most likely to rely on a government student loan (40%) and parents or family (27%). Many seem unsure as to how they will finance their program, since 23% did not indicate they would be using any income source to fund their program. Both recent (18%) and other immigrants (23%) were more likely to have discontinued studies due to lack of funds, compared to Canadian-born students (13%).

While the majority of recent immigrants indicated that their career college was their first choice (64%), the proportion who indicated that their present career college was their preferred

choice was slightly lower than that of other immigrants (67%) or non-immigrants (74%).

It may be that the more limited language ability of recent immigrants (only 36% reported speaking English or French at home) may have contributed to the circumstance that they were less likely to be attending programs at their institution of choice.

According to the survey, students attending private career colleges fall into a number of distinct clusters:<sup>28</sup>

- Older males, retraining after health concerns or limited employment opportunities reduced the viability of a previous career;
- Older females, retraining or re-entering the workforce after a leave due to family responsibilities;
- Younger students attending programs that are not available in the public college system;
- Students, both young and old, interested in a program of short duration that will provide specific workforce skills; these students may or may not have previous degrees from college or university;
- Young students who intend to pursue additional college or university education

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

after a first degree at a private career college; and

- Immigrants, retraining or changing careers because their education or qualifications are not recognized in Canada.

The third study, Phase III-Graduate Survey, which includes a review of career college outcomes six to nine months after graduation, was completed in 2009. In total, 4,065 students completed the survey.

The vast majority (98%) of the students had graduated from their private college.<sup>29</sup>

Students' post-graduation pathways can be summarized as follows:<sup>30</sup>

- Working (79%), either full-time (60%) or part-time (19%), (the figure for Ontario was 73%)
- In school (6%)
- Unemployed and looking for work (10%)
- Unemployed and not looking for work (5%)

78 percent of the graduates felt that their main job was either very related (57%) or somewhat related (21%) to their training.<sup>31</sup> The mean and median income of all working graduates (excluding don't

know, no responses) was \$26,727 and \$24,960 respectively.<sup>32</sup>

Regarding program related debt:<sup>33</sup>

- 37% of graduates had no program related debt;
- 27% had debt of less than \$10,000;
- 24% had debt of between \$10,001 and \$20,000; and
- 9% reported debt in excess of \$20,000.

In general, graduates were satisfied with their colleges.<sup>34</sup> 30 percent indicated that they were very satisfied, 36 percent satisfied, 19 percent neutral, 8 percent dissatisfied and 7 percent very dissatisfied. Satisfaction rates, however, were lower in Ontario. The following table compares the satisfaction rates in Ontario in 2007 between private colleges and community colleges.<sup>35</sup>

**Satisfaction rates, graduates of private colleges and of community colleges, 2007**

	Very satisfied/Satisfied	Neither satisfied/Nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied/Very dissatisfied
private colleges	62%	21%	17%
Community Colleges	83%	10%	7%

<sup>29</sup> *Survey of Canadian Career Colleges Students – Phase III: Graduate Survey*, p.19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p.47.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.59-60.

<sup>35</sup> All KPIs for the community colleges in Ontario are available at [collegesontario.org](http://collegesontario.org) website.

Although there are no figures available, the interviews we conducted for our study as well as other anecdotal data suggest that the KPIs for private colleges in Toronto may score lower than either the Ontario or Canada figures. Whether there is a correlation between lower KPI scores for Toronto private colleges and the high enrollment rates of newcomers at these schools warrants more attention.



A 2012 study commissioned by the Ontario Association of Career Colleges (OACC) provides more recent figures for Ontario private colleges.<sup>36</sup> According to this OACC study, 62,500 students were enrolled in private colleges in Ontario in August 2011. The study also shows that private college graduation rates are consistently higher than those for community colleges. In 2010, the graduation rate for private colleges was 80.3% and 64.2% for community colleges. Among 2007 graduates, however, 77% of private college graduates and 90.5% of community college graduates reported working six months after graduation. Evidently, employment outcomes for community colleges are better, which may also explain lower OSAP default rates for community colleges compared to private colleges. (As an aside: the focus of this OACC report was to illustrate the impact of this sector on the economy, and less so the

educational and employment outcomes of its students. Thus, the study indicated that private colleges employ around 12,000 people and collectively pay \$94 million in business and payroll taxes. While any piece of information about graduation and employment rates is invaluable for prospective private college students, in contrast to Ontario community colleges' key performance indicators, the figures provided for private colleges in Ontario in this report do not allow for college-to-college comparison. Given that those percentages are the averages for over 470 private colleges, this data is not at all helpful in assisting prospective students in deciding which college to choose.)

Some data on graduation rates and employment rates have been collected by the National Association of Career Colleges as well as by the Ontario Association of Career Colleges which show consistently **higher graduation rates** and **lower employment rates** for private college students than for both university and community college graduates in Ontario.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Impact of Ontario Career Colleges.*

However, since these reports are not widely publicized nor placed at the Ministry's website it is very difficult to find out about these reports. How and from where do the prospective students obtain information on private colleges? As the ombudsman Andre Marin stated, "you have to be Sherlock Holmes to find out the information you need about a college."<sup>37</sup>

In one of the rare publications by Statistics Canada on this subject, the author concluded that private college graduates earned no more than high school graduates in 2003 but were slightly more likely to be employed than high school students (Li, 2006).

As part of their audit, the office of the Auditor General of Ontario conducted an independent survey in 2010 of 500 recent private college graduates about their employment status and their awareness of their rights under the relevant legislation. According to this survey, 85% of respondents felt that KPIs such as graduate employment rates or employer satisfaction rates collected for community colleges would be very useful. About 50% of the respondents indicated that such information was currently being provided in some form by the colleges they attended. The survey also found out that although 75% of the graduates were employed full or part time, less than 40%

were employed full time in a position related to their private college program.<sup>38</sup>

As the examination of the literature review above illustrates, the information on private colleges in Ontario is still very patchy and confusing: some information is available for private colleges at a national level, some for Ontario only; some available for only a certain category of private colleges, or for only a few individual colleges, often limited to a particular year, all of which makes it almost impossible to compare figures on a consistent and continuous basis to understand the big picture.

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Elizabeth Church, *The Globe and Mail*, October 29, 2009.

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<sup>38</sup> Annual Report of Auditor General of Ontario, p.256.





## Key Informant Interviews-Findings

### *Why are newcomers attracted to private colleges?*

The various barriers newcomers face in entering to labour market are well known and well documented.<sup>39</sup> Facing these barriers, many newcomers choose either to change their career or retrain because their education or qualifications are not recognized in Canada. While newcomers are attracted to private colleges for various reasons, private colleges also seem to be attracted to newcomers. And, in fact, private colleges appear to be targeting areas of Toronto with large newcomer populations.<sup>40</sup>

As stated earlier, for our study we conducted 22 key informant interviews with frontline staff, including settlement workers and employment

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<sup>39</sup> According to 2007 Stat Can report “very recent immigrants who have been in Canada five years or less, that is, had the most difficulty integrating into the labour market, even though they were more likely than the Canadian-born population to have a university education. In 2006, the national unemployment rate for these immigrants was 11.5%, more than double the rate of 4.9% for the Canadian-born population”.

<sup>40</sup> For example, TriOS has opened its ninth campus location in Scarborough in response to larger newcomer population in Scarborough, see Internet Wire, April 11, 2011.

counsellors, at 16 immigrant-serving agencies (as well as two interviews with previous private college management professionals). When we asked why they think newcomers are drawn to private colleges, 18 out of 22 interviewees thought that because private college programs are shorter and more focused, they may appear more attractive to newcomers, who in most



instances feel under considerable pressure to start earning a living soon after they arrive in Canada. Many newcomers think that they have already lost a lot of time trying to settle in a new country and find a job, and they fear that every minute they are away from their professional field it will become more difficult to get back to that field. As a result, they want to obtain a Canadian credential in the fastest way possible. Private colleges offer more options such as evening, weekend classes and flexible class schedules. For many newcomers who are trying to get their credentials and work in survival jobs at the same time, such flexibility

is invaluable. Hence, two to three year-long community college programs with a maximum of three admissions a year are simply too long for newcomers.

Secondly, newcomers prefer private colleges because they are easy to get into, as many interviewees pointed out. This is especially the case for newcomers who face language barriers. But as one interviewee pointed out, newcomers “shouldn’t feel that, because of certain barriers, they have to settle for (private colleges)”<sup>41</sup> During our interviews, we heard many times that language assessment tests done at some private colleges are very easy, perhaps too easy, which can result in more enrolments than are warranted.

Thirdly, aggressive recruitment methods specifically targeting newcomers were also mentioned frequently. Two interviewees told us that out of desperation some newcomers apply to private colleges just to receive OSAP money.<sup>42</sup> We don’t know how widespread such a practice is, but it is alarming to hear about such desperation to access cash. More than one interviewee noted that lack of information and knowledge of the education system is one of the reasons why newcomers choose private colleges.<sup>43</sup> One person stated that sometimes newcomers do not have a choice as some

programs, such as aesthetics, are only offered by private colleges.

When we asked whether there are particular newcomer populations that tend to gravitate towards private colleges, in terms of country of origin, gender, time spent in Canada, or occupational background, we heard a wide range of answers, so generalizations may not be appropriate. It seems that other than the Second Career programs, very recent newcomers (who have been in Canada for less than two years), and who come from Southern or Eastern Asia (with no noticeable gender differences) tend to prefer private colleges. For Second Career, a typical client is a Canadian-born older worker. In terms of sectors, health care, administration and community work are the most common areas of study at private colleges for newcomers.

### ***Experiences of Toronto newcomers in private career colleges vs. community colleges***

When we asked the frontline staff how their clients’ experiences with private colleges compared with that of community colleges, all of them agreed that, in general, their newcomer clients do not have positive experiences with private colleges, although there are a few success stories related to private colleges. One interviewee said, “the only thing in my experience, and I’ve been around for quite a

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<sup>41</sup> Interviewee #15.

<sup>42</sup> Interviewees #11 and #14.

<sup>43</sup> Interviewees #8, #19 and #20.

while, I've never heard anything positive (about private colleges) – it is more about damaging situations.”<sup>44</sup> Although we heard such comments frequently during our interviews,<sup>45</sup> one should not jump to the conclusion that all private colleges need to be avoided. Newcomers' dissatisfaction with private colleges may have different reasons. As we will examine in subsequent sections, sometimes lack of information leads to a wrong decision, which limits the success a newcomer might experience after graduation, something which may have nothing to do with that particular private college's quality of education. Hence, it is crucial to understand why newcomers tend to have negative experiences with private colleges. There seems to be three major reasons behind this dissatisfaction.

### **Poor employment outcomes**

Most of the interviewees stated that clients of theirs who attended community colleges have better employment outcomes than those who attended private colleges. One interviewee said that those clients who completed the ECE program at a particular community college found jobs much faster than those who completed the same program at private colleges.<sup>46</sup> Another interviewee mentioned that none of her clients who attended private

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Interviewee # 5 also stated that she has never really heard of any positive experience with private colleges.

<sup>46</sup> Interviewee #13.

colleges found a job related to their field of study.<sup>47</sup> “For the community worker program, most of the people that I've seen who've gone to private colleges haven't been able to secure employment in whatever field they studied in these programs.”<sup>48</sup> That being said, there are success stories as well among private college graduates. One frontline staff, for example, stated that one of her clients who went to a private college for a chef training course found employment immediately after graduating.<sup>49</sup> It also seems that employment outcomes for those attending private colleges are a little better if they are part of the Second Career program. Whether employment outcomes for newcomers and Canadian-born individuals differ is beyond the scope of this paper, however the insights acquired from the conversations with the frontline staff suggest three main reasons behind the poor employment outcomes for newcomers who attended private colleges:

### **Employers are often wary of private college education or training:**

Employment counsellors whom we talked with stated that it is, in general, more difficult to find placements for newcomers with private college diplomas than those with community college diplomas. Sometimes, they have to work harder to persuade

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<sup>47</sup> Interviewee #11.

<sup>48</sup> Interviewee #9.

<sup>49</sup> Interviewee #20.

employers to hire their clients if they have private college certificates.<sup>50</sup> A few counsellors, however, pointed out that they have successfully placed private college graduates, especially in the IT field. The success of the placement depended on many factors, such as job readiness, soft skills, English skills and a diploma. If a client has all the required skills and is job ready, it is possible to find an employment even with a private college diploma.<sup>51</sup>

In one instance, an interviewee told us of a client with a private college diploma who went to a job fair and showed her resume to an employer, where upon the employer said “you know, those diplomas don’t have (any) value.”<sup>52</sup> There are also other examples where clients did information interviews with employers and asked them whether their private college diplomas would be recognized and the employers said “no.”<sup>53</sup> Why do employers tend to value community college diplomas more highly than private college diplomas? Some interviewees mentioned that sometimes employers simply do not know the name of the private college, and so the quality of the certificate is unknown to the employer. As is well known, in this highly competitive job market, anything that raises a

question in a resume translates into a job application being rejected. Sometimes, these employers may have had a bad experience with a private college graduate and they tend to generalize that all private college graduates are not qualified. It is hard to come to a conclusion that the lack of recognition by the employers is a direct result of substandard training at private colleges. As one interviewee pointed out, “it is not just about education, but also a lot of things mixed together.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Lack of proper English language**

**assessment:** The majority of the interviewees mentioned that they have seen newcomers with very poor English skills being admitted into private college programs. More alarmingly, this lack of proper language assessment appears to be one of the main reasons why newcomers are drawn to private colleges, as they know that they would not be admitted to community colleges with their existing level of English proficiency. Even if they graduate, because of their poor English skills, they would not be considered job ready.<sup>55</sup> One interviewee noted “they (private colleges) admit everyone, I have never seen anyone not accepted to a private college program.”<sup>56</sup> Hence, by admitting students with low English skills, it would appear that

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<sup>50</sup> See interviewee #12.

<sup>51</sup> Interviewees #17 and #18.

<sup>52</sup> Interviewee #22.

<sup>53</sup> Interviewee #12.

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<sup>54</sup> Interviewee #21.

<sup>55</sup> Interviewee #16.

some private colleges set up students for failure.

### **Lack of placement/practicum**

**opportunities:** This issue was raised by many of those we interviewed. One of the purposes of a placement is to prepare students for a workplace and to help them find a job later. However, some private colleges seem to be failing their students when it comes to placement opportunities. While some schools do not offer any placements whatsoever, others do not provide adequate assessment or supervision. One interviewee noted that her agency was approached by a private college to place their students doing PSW program but the private college was looking for ways to place students in private homes with no supervision.<sup>57</sup> It seems that the private college was missing the point that the whole idea behind the placement is learning and practicing under *supervision*. Moreover, as one interviewee commented, the learning contracts or placement assessments differ between community colleges and private colleges. “The private college ones... had only hours of the person’s work—that’s it, nothing else. Then we compare that to an assessment that comes from the community college, which is very extensive....what is covered, what is the

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<sup>56</sup> Interviewee #7.

<sup>57</sup> Interviewee #10.

person learning—all these things that give you a well-rounded picture of what the student is learning in the placement.”<sup>58</sup> In addition to these challenges, it seems that private college students have a difficult time finding a placement compared to community college students.<sup>59</sup> Sometimes, students are asked to pay extra money for the placement or they had to find their own placement.<sup>60</sup>

### Substandard quality of education/instructors/ curriculum/facilities

Interviewees heard more complaints about the quality of education at private colleges compared to that of community colleges. It is interesting to note that most of the time the reason why newcomers choose private colleges over community colleges is also the main reason behind their dissatisfaction with private colleges—the length of studies. Yet some newcomers complained that the training felt rushed and they couldn’t obtain in-depth knowledge of the materials. Others said the training they received was sub-standard.<sup>61</sup> Or that what they were expecting in terms of the curriculum was not what they got.<sup>62</sup> One interviewee told us that her agency accepted a placement student from a private college, and compared to other placement students from

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<sup>58</sup> Interviewee #9.

<sup>59</sup> Interviewee #4.

<sup>60</sup> Interviewee #18.

<sup>61</sup> Interviewee #20.

<sup>62</sup> Interviewee #6.

community colleges, her knowledge was very limited: “she didn’t know the difference between counselling and interviewing or (how to) seek information for data-entry.”<sup>63</sup>

In terms of class size, although a few newcomers were not happy about classes that were too crowded, generally, they were happy with the smaller class sizes at private colleges. However, one common source of complaint was the instructors. Interviewees heard in more than one case where instructors weren’t there, or students were given a book and a computer and were told to study at their own pace.<sup>64</sup> At some private colleges, it seems that there are no classrooms and all the students need to do to receive their diploma is to complete 20 hours of study a week—the students go to a lab facility and they spend all their time there by themselves reading or studying without any supervision.<sup>65</sup> Other common sources of complaints include condition of computers, noisiness, and lack of proper classrooms. On the other hand, one client told one of the interviewees that the instructors at the private college he attended were very approachable and he liked his instructors.

### **Deceptive or questionable practices**

Interviewees heard and sometimes experienced deceptive practices by private colleges when it

came to recruiting and screening prospective students. Based on what we heard from the frontline staff, deceptive practices can be categorized into four types:

**False promises:** One interviewee mentioned, when one of her clients inquired about a private college program, that she was told that it was a “recognized” school and that she would certainly find a job within six months after she graduated. But later the interviewee and the client researched the school together and found that the college program was not on the list of approved schools designated for the licence that she sought.<sup>66</sup> Another client was told that if she studied office administration program with their private college, they would hire her after she graduated, which did not happen.<sup>67</sup> One client was promised a placement which never happened. A few interviewees mentioned that their clients were promised job search support after they graduated but that support never came.<sup>68</sup> Many newcomers, it seems, were promised or sometimes guaranteed that they would secure employment after graduating, which turned out not to be the case.

(While our focus in this study is private colleges offering vocational training, it is also important to note that some

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<sup>63</sup> Interviewee #20.

<sup>64</sup> Interviewee #7.

<sup>65</sup> Interviewee #11.

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<sup>66</sup> Interviewee #4.

<sup>67</sup> Interviewee #13.

private colleges offering language courses are being called “handbag colleges” as one of the interviewees told us, who previously had worked for one of these colleges as a customer service representative. She would only see the students twice, first when they made their payment and, second, when they came to receive their certificate. There were no classes, no language instruction whatsoever, and the label “handbag college” refers to their highly transient nature, needing no facilities or equipment, just students coming by to register and later to receive their final papers.)

**Language assessment:** As mentioned earlier, the standards for language assessment among some private colleges raise a lot of questions for the interviewees. “We have a client here, she is here now taking her CLB level 4/5. She went to a private college and she was told that her level was 8.”<sup>68</sup> Before attending the LINC classes, that same student registered with a private college and started her classes but soon afterwards she realized that her English was not good enough to handle the course. So, she wanted to withdraw from the course and asked for a refund. She was told that she

couldn’t withdraw right away, rather she had to attend the classes at least two weeks before the withdrawal request.

Unfortunately, she ended up with a letter stating that she owed \$3800 to the school. It appears that for some private colleges, whatever the language level of the prospective student, that person scores well at language assessment tests and is told that his or her English level is sufficiently high to qualify for enrolment.

a) **Recruitment practices/advertisement:**

Some private colleges, as many interviewees noted, have questionable recruitment practices. For one, the admission process is often rushed, relying on high pressure sales tactics. One client was told that the fees were going to be increased the following week so she needed to register immediately. One interviewee mentioned that she was approached by a private college and offered a commission if she referred clients to the school.<sup>70</sup> Aggressive recruitment methods are common among recruiters given that, most of the time, they are paid on a commission, a fee for each student they recruit. Moreover, it does not seem uncommon for someone who contacts a private college to ask a few questions to then receive a large number of phone calls making a sales

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<sup>68</sup> Interviewees #6, #5.

<sup>69</sup> Interviewee #20.

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<sup>70</sup> Interviewee #11.

pitch, to the point of “harassment.”<sup>71</sup> One interviewee said, some private colleges make statements such as “our graduates work with the Ministry with this, with that” in their advertisements, however, there is no way of knowing for certain whether these advertisements are true or not.<sup>72</sup>

b) **Program fees and OSAP:** It seems that some private colleges are not upfront about their program fees. For example, in many instances they do not provide this information on their websites or even disclose it over the phone, instead inviting prospective students to come into their offices, where they can be subjected to a more direct form of sales pressure. As well, some private colleges are disingenuous in their references to OSAP. Interviewees have indicated that some private colleges provide immediate and extensive support with the OSAP application without fully explaining what OSAP is. In some instances, when explaining their fees, the PPCs mention that students might not have to pay back the total amount of money they receive from OSAP. Further, they sometimes deduct the OSAP amount from the program fees to make it appear that the program fees are lower. Many

interviewees reported that in most cases newcomers did not know or fully understand that OSAP was a loan.<sup>73</sup>

That being said, newcomers often feel well supported in their initial encounters with private colleges, and also during admission and registration process, compared to community colleges. In fact, some interviewees argued that community colleges do not support newcomers well at all, with an admission process that can be too formal and sometimes intimidating for newcomers. As stated before, an easy and fast admission process is one of the reasons why private colleges are attractive to newcomers. While convenience is certainly a plus, many newcomers do not seem to understand what they are signing up for.



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<sup>71</sup> Interviewee #16.

<sup>72</sup> Interviewee #19.

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<sup>73</sup> Interviewees #17 and # 18.



### ***Best and worst things about private colleges***

Our key informants were asked what was the best and the worst thing they heard about their clients' experiences with private colleges. There was a striking similarity among many of the responses:

Interviewee #2: "The best thing is I feel happy too when they tell me 'oh yeah, I graduated. I finally got my diploma' – that's the best thing and the happiest thing I heard from them too. But the worst thing is when we talk and they say 'oh I'm still looking for the job' – that's the hard thing I heard from them."

Interviewee #6: "my best and worst is the same. The time that they can get in. For clients, they are thinking that the best thing for them to get in within a

short period of time. And that is also the worst thing because that is part of the issue."

Interviewee #9: "The best thing I guess would have to be that they're all very happy with the timeframe in which they finished their program. The worst thing was the piece about the fact that it was a waste of money."

Interviewee #10: "I think I've mentioned already, the good thing about private college is that it fast tracks you into a new career. .... And of course, the worst thing is having a huge debt on your back. And sometimes without being able to be recognized."

Interviewee #11: "The best thing is like when they say the time is flexible. You can go there whenever so they can utilize their other time for other informal jobs or other things they want. The other thing is getting the OSAP to support their family for the time being. The worst thing is that they cannot use this certificate for any professional job."

Interviewee #16: "I've never heard of the best thing. The fact that they got the diploma might be the best thing but the fact that they can't use it is the worst thing."





## ***What Frontline Staff communicate to clients about private colleges***

All interviewees clearly stated that their role is not to suggest one college over the other when clients ask for advice. They define their role as helping clients to make informed decisions, so they discuss both the pro's and con's of attending private colleges – the shorter time frame, for example, is an important advantage when it comes to private colleges. While frontline staff, with few exceptions, avoid making strong recommendations for or against private colleges, they would “caution” their clients when they are thinking about attending private colleges. The reasons for such caution were based on the reasons already discussed earlier in this report. Thus, in this context, during the initial meeting with a client, interviewees typically tend to warn their clients about three things. Firstly, that the cost is higher at private colleges than at community colleges. Secondly, that the diplomas or certificates granted by private colleges may not be recognized by employers or the regulatory bodies. Thirdly, based on their own experiences with previous clients and employers, most frontline staff suggest that employment outcomes for newcomers graduating from PSSs are not very good. Sometimes they also refer to the fact that many of their clients expressed disappointment with the

private colleges they attended. “Clients cannot find employment afterwards. They might be promised one thing, but once they complete the program and pay for it, they realize that they are not finding a lot of support with the employment. They are not prepared sometimes for the workplace. The cost is a bit much and it is not necessarily a (good) job preparation.”<sup>74</sup>

The common practice among the frontline staff when dealing with clients exploring the PPC option is to do a general assessment and ask their clients why they want to attend a private college, what program they want to study and how this program is related to their career goals. Sometimes, private colleges are better suited to client needs than community colleges, especially if a client wants to take a quick course on one subject, such as AutoCAD. But if a client wants to have a diploma or certificate, “probably [Community College X] would be better than [Private College Y].”<sup>75</sup> After the assessment, frontline staff provide their clients with resources and tools to do research, including visiting the Ministry’s website to find out whether the private college in question is registered or not. They always encourage their clients to do more research before making any decision.

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<sup>74</sup> Interviewee #9.

<sup>75</sup> Interviewee #19.



community colleges, or about the differences between registered versus unregistered private colleges. Even when they did some research, the focus of the newcomer client always seems to centre around the time frame – how long it will take for

Some advise their clients to visit the private college, talk with the students there, as well as call some employers and ask for their feedback. Sometimes, similar advice is given with respect to community colleges as well. The majority of the interviewees also provide information on community colleges even if their clients have approached them only for advice on private colleges. One interviewee said she would recommend community colleges over private colleges. “I worked at private colleges and taught in community colleges, I know how (private colleges) operate. Community colleges are very properly managed and operated.”<sup>76</sup>

During such an assessment with their clients, many interviewees observed that newcomers know very little about the differences between private colleges and

them to receive a diploma or a certificate. Sometimes, newcomers know that a particular private college they are interested in is “registered with the Ministry, but they don’t know what that means, they think the Ministry is behind the private college.”<sup>77</sup> The reasons behind the lack of information on private colleges on the part of newcomers require further investigation. Many frontline staff admitted that they also do not know much about private colleges. One simple explanation is that the information is simply not there, as we have discussed early in the report when reviewing the literature. Obviously, more tools need to be developed to help newcomers as well as others to fully understand the Canadian post-secondary

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<sup>76</sup> Interviewee #3.

<sup>77</sup> Interviewee #7.

education system. Therefore, we asked our interviewees what those tools might be.

### **Suggestions from interviewees for improving newcomers' interactions with our post-secondary education process**

The following represents the feedback from the frontline staff on what tools would be useful for newcomers to help them make informed decisions on their post-secondary education options:

- a) **Knowledge transfer tools:** As noted by many interviewees more information should be available to everyone who is interested in attending a private college. Their suggestions can be summarized as follows:
- A website that compares community colleges and private colleges in terms of length of study, costs, and whether they are recognized for specific licenses or not, all on one page;
  - Pamphlets or fact sheets explaining the differences between community colleges and private colleges in simple language or in different languages;
  - Post-secondary education pathways being included as a standard part of any newcomer orientation session;
  - Fact sheets on employment rates for different private college courses and programs;
  - Fact sheets that are prepared by employers;
  - More information sessions about private colleges offered by settlement agencies;
  - An interactive website on post-secondary education options, allowing prospective students to enter their information, career choices and experiences, that would generate a report on the best available program options available to them;
  - Welcome packages prepared by CIC and given to newcomers when they first arrive in Canada, including information on private colleges;
  - More user-friendly and easy to interpret labour market information;
  - A clear, unbiased assessment of what employers are actually looking for when they make hiring decisions;
  - A toolkit on post-secondary education specifically developed for frontline staff. As one interviewee commented, although there are websites with good information on private colleges, they are not easy to navigate. So, the issue of accessibility of the limited information that is available on private colleges should also be addressed.
- b) **Standardization/regulations:** There was a general agreement among the interviewees that the provincial government is not doing enough to monitor and regulate private colleges. The lack of standardization seems to be a major concern. The other issue relates

to enforcement. One interviewee suggested that the Ministry should have a tip line and should encourage students to call the line if they are having a problem with their college. If a private college is not following the standardized program required to receive a PSW certificate, for example, they should not be allowed to name the certificate they issue as a PSW certificate.<sup>78</sup> One person commented that the assessments and admission requirements should be standardized whether one chooses to apply for a community college or a private college. The Ministry, one interviewee suggested, should make it mandatory for private colleges to make a statement clarifying that “this program will (or will not) make you eligible to be a “medical lab assistant in the eyes of the regulatory body.”<sup>79</sup> It is crucial for private colleges to issue a disclaimer so that prospective students know exactly what they are signing up for. It should be made relatively easy to determine, on the Ministry’s website, whether a private college has a complaint filed against it, together with the nature of the complaint. private colleges should also be monitored on how often they

upgrade or change their curricula to better meet labour market needs.

There were also a few other recommendations aimed at ensuring better employment outcomes for the graduates of private colleges, such as: better assessments of prospective students, ongoing tutoring support, placements and internships offered by private colleges, as well as better job search support for the graduates.

The findings of our study clearly indicate that a close examination of newcomers’ experiences with private colleges shows the complexity of the issues around private colleges. As one interviewee perfectly captured it, “job search, education and the labour market” are all interconnected. What is more, the confusion around certification, degrees, diplomas, accreditation, licensing, foreign credentials assessment and credentials recognition makes it very difficult for newcomers who are already struggling with various barriers to enter the labour market to make informed career and education related choices. The recommendations below aim to improve both employment and educational outcomes for these newcomers.

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<sup>78</sup> Interviewee #10.

<sup>79</sup> Interviewee #4.



## Recommendations

The focus of this study has been the newcomer experience with private colleges. Obviously many of the recommendations below would also help other categories of students (notably other immigrants as well as the Canadian-born). It may well be that newcomers are the most vulnerable in a circumstance where they feel under more intense pressure to secure the appropriate credentials and find a job, while also experiencing the most confusion in a marketplace of educational choices where not all the relevant information is available. These ideas seek to make the process more transparent and make it easier for prospective students to make informed choices:

1. **Increase enforcement activity.** *The Private Career Colleges Act* is an important step toward regulating private colleges and protecting the rights of students/consumers. Yet, there seems to be a disconnect between the protection the Act provides and the persistent complaints we heard in this and other studies. The Act monitors private colleges with regard to their administration, student refunds, complaints and the way in which they advertise their offerings. As our interviewees confirmed, some private colleges are violating these rules. As the Auditor General's report indicates, although there are over 650 campuses in Ontario, the Ministry estimated that only 30 campuses had been inspected in 2010 and, according to the Ministry, only 5% of inspectors' time was devoted to actual inspections.<sup>80</sup> Clearly, the real issue seems to be not the lack of regulation but the lack of enforcement and the Ministry should remedy this gap. This, however, does not mean that the regulations themselves do not need improvement.
2. **Pay more attention to the quality of the education provided.** The incidence of substandard education from some private colleges has a broader impact; it harms reputable private colleges, it undermines the integrity of the post-secondary education system in Ontario and, hence, the Ministry itself, and it confounds employers, including the disservice done to the students immediately affected. A more proactive approach by the Ministry in ensuring the quality of education offered at private colleges would benefit everyone. Ontario, perhaps, can learn few things from Manitoba:

“Anyone wishing to launch a private school must apply to the Minister and meet 13 specific criteria, including faculty-to-student ratio, fees, etc. Unlike in any other province, the applicant must also provide details on how the school intends to demonstrate that the student has successfully completed the curriculum.....There are specific criteria for faculty appointments, and the actual appointment is made by the minister. In addition, the minister must be informed immediately if a teacher leaves the school for any reason.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Annual Report of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2011, pp. 252-3.

<sup>81</sup> Auld, p.20.

3. **Require Key Performance Indicators of private colleges, just like community colleges.** Anyone seeking information on graduation rates, graduate employment, graduate satisfaction, employer satisfaction and student satisfaction related to community colleges can easily do so, not only for recent years but for previous years as well. A prospective student can compare the KPIs for an individual college, for its various programs and over the years, before making a decision. While everybody would agree that such information is invaluable, such information is nowhere to be found for private colleges. It should be the Ministry's responsibility to ensure that KPIs, independently verified, are available for private colleges as well.
4. **More awareness for prospective students.** Although the Ministry has undertaken some initiatives to enhance public awareness, more needs to be done in this area. For example, the Ministry was supposed to distribute "buyer beware" posters and pamphlets to immigrant-serving agencies, employment centres and high schools, to ensure that prospective students are aware of registered and unregistered private colleges and understand that programs need to be approved for licensing purposes. Yet, none of the frontline staff we interviewed mentioned receiving one at their agencies.
5. **More research and studies about private colleges.** One of the most challenging areas when it comes to private colleges is the lack of information on private colleges. We don't even know exactly how many registered private colleges exist in Ontario, given that the number changes almost daily. Hence, more research needs to be done on private colleges, including the experiences of newcomers, the views of employers about private college training, the recognition of private college certificates by regulatory bodies, and the labour market outcomes of private college graduates.

Given that many newcomers seeking entry to private colleges do so because of the lack of recognition for their foreign credentials suggests that more still needs to be done to facilitate the process for acknowledging education and experience obtained overseas. That being said, the recommendations listed here would go a long way to reducing the disappointment and costs borne by many of our newcomers in their encounters with private colleges. Indeed, implementation of these recommendations would also help other prospective students, as well as the private college industry as a whole, by reducing the damage done to the reputation of the entire industry by the actions of an unscrupulous minority.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

### Pre-screening Questions:

*In your work, do you ever deal with questions about private career colleges (colleges that are not an Ontario community college)?*

*How frequently?*

*At least once weekly*  *At least once monthly*  *At least a few times a year*

### **Employment Counsellors:**

1. What do you usually tell clients when they ask you about Private Career Colleges?
2. Have you ever recommended a PCC to a newcomer? Why or why not?
3. How much do your clients know about private career colleges? Do they know about the differences between them and community colleges? Do they know about registered versus unregistered private colleges?
4. In your experience, how do employers typically view diplomas from Private Career Colleges?
5. Have you been able to successfully place/find jobs for PCC graduates?
6. In your experience, what is the main reason why newcomers think about attending PCCs?
7. In your experience, are the newcomers who attend PCCs high-skilled newcomers (i.e. foreign education & experience) looking for “Canadian experience” and/or Canadian education to supplement their foreign credentials?
8. What is clients’ experience of private career colleges?
  - With assessment and recruitment? i.e. language assessments, placement interviews, etc.
  - With classroom studies?
  - With credentials?

9. In your experience, are there particular newcomer populations that tend to gravitate towards PCCs?

- East Asian? South Asian?
- Sector? (engineering, IT)
- Gender (women?)
- Time spent in Canada?

10. How would you compare your clients' experiences and understanding with PCCs vs. experiences with community colleges? Have you heard of any deceptive or questionable practices?

11. What is the best thing and the worst thing you have heard about your clients experience with PCCs?

12. What tools would help newcomers to understand the Canadian post-secondary education system and their legal and consumer rights?

13. In your opinion, are there any changes that can be made that would enhance the experience for PCC students?

### **Settlement Counsellors:**

1. What do you usually tell clients when they ask you about Private Career Colleges?
2. Have you ever recommended a PCC to a newcomer? Why or why not?
3. How much do your clients know about private career colleges? Do they know about the differences between them and community colleges? Do they know about registered versus unregistered private colleges?
4. In your experience, what is the main reason why newcomers think about attending PCCs?
5. What is clients' experience of private career colleges?
  - With assessment and recruitment? i.e. language assessments, placement interviews, etc.
  - With classroom studies?
  - With credentials?
6. In your experience, are there particular newcomer populations that tend to gravitate towards PCCs?
  - East Asian? South Asian?
  - Sector? (engineering, IT)
  - Gender (women?)
  - Time spent in Canada?
7. How would you compare your clients' experiences and understanding with PCCs vs. experiences with community colleges? Have you heard of any deceptive or questionable practices?
8. What is the best thing and the worst thing you have heard about your clients experience with PCCs?
9. What tools would help newcomers to understand the Canadian post-secondary education system and their legal and consumer rights?

