



# Action Guide: Enabling Supports for International Learner Success in Ontario Postsecondary Education

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# Executive Summary

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*“I’m happy to be here today. Hopefully my story can help other international learners out.” – an international learner studying at an Ontario college*

International education has become a recurrent issue in Ontario postsecondary education, as Ontario and, indeed, the entire country grapples with increased international student enrolment as a way to raise revenue for the sector. Over the past several months eCampusOntario has conducted research on the international learner journey. Our goal is to support our sector with digital solutions to improve the international learner experience in Ontario.

We have placed the voice of the international learner at the center of this work, which has involved consultations with international learners about the challenges they face and supports they could use along their journey in Ontario’s postsecondary sector. International learners who are currently studying or have recently graduated from Ontario’s colleges and universities face a plethora of unique challenges throughout their entire postsecondary journey – a process that extends from applications to institutions through the transition to post-graduate life. Through direct conversations with international learners, we can better understand their experiences and journey through the Ontario postsecondary sector, and their needs for and responses to solutions. The experiences of international learners as uncovered in this research provides learner-validated digital solutions to the barriers they face. eCampusOntario is providing this information to our members, federal and provincial governments, and other valued stakeholders, in order to promote the collaborative co-design of digital-by-design solutions.

## How to Use This Action Guide

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This action guide is a condensed version of the full eCampusOntario report on international learners and has been created for those who are solutions-focused. This condensed report highlights the international learner journey and proposed digital solutions to mitigate barriers that international learners face along their journey. For those who would like to read the full breadth of the report, including the history of international learners in Canada, the current context, eCampusOntario’s research methods and results, and other actors and jurisdictions involved in the international learner in postsecondary education ecosystem, the full, unabridged report can be found on eCampusOntario’s website.



# Key Findings

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International learners in Ontario overwhelmingly indicated that there is a significant information barrier when it comes to access to validated and clear information to support the different stages of their journey. Their top concerns are:

- Finding safe and affordable housing,
- Locating reliable employment, and
- Navigating immigration processes.

Learners indicated that they may not understand Canadian cultures, customs, regulations, and academic processes. International learners also indicated that they do not feel prepared for the Ontario postsecondary classroom, including online and hybrid modalities, digital fluency skills, communications, academic expectations, and learning styles. International learners feel lonely and isolated in a foreign country. By identifying these barriers and challenges, eCampusOntario was able to work with learners to discuss, ideate and validate digital-by-design solutions.

## Learner Identified Solutions:

- All encompassing website with validated information and AI chatbot
- Student portals for housing, employment, and mental health
- Education agent portal

## eCampusOntario Identified and Learner Validated Solutions:

- Digital Fluency Micro-credential
- Study in Ontario Micro-credential
- Open education resource uptake
- Digital peer mentorship
- Digital credentials and virtual wallets

## eCampusOntario Identified Solutions:

- Working group on international learners in postsecondary education
- Blockchain acceptance letters
- Supporting the re-calibration of the post-graduation work permit
- eCampusOntario policy work
- Labour market connectivity and a study-and-stay program
- Mandatory licensing of agents
- Co-curricular Micro-credential framework
- Synchronization of education and immigration policy



# Introduction

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Through 2023, headlines in Canadian news have referenced “international students” in relation to stories about fraudulent immigration, the housing crisis, employment, social services, cost of living, and higher education. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) defines international students as postsecondary students in Canada who do not have a permanent residency status in Canada and have entered the country on a visa (most commonly the study permit program) or as a refugee.<sup>1</sup> The number of international students studying in Canada has grown exponentially in the last decade, from 300,000 in 2013 to an anticipated 900,000 by the end of 2023.<sup>2</sup> While the number of international students in Canada fell during the COVID-19 pandemic amid its associated travel restrictions, 2022 and 2023 saw unprecedented rates of international students entering the country. International students are recognized as a significant source of revenue to postsecondary institutions and a potential source of labour to replace Canada’s aging workforce. Postsecondary institutions in Canada aggressively recruit international students and charge them higher tuition fees to increase revenues to supplement reductions in public spending.<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada has also reported that the share of international students who worked while studying has been increasing.<sup>4</sup> At a time when education and economic policy have become intertwined on the subject of international learners, the study of

the international learner journey in Ontario is of utmost significance.

Reports in news media suggest that there has also been a plight of problems directly impacting the international student journey in Canada. In August 2023, the Canadian Minister of Immigration, Marc Miller, told the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, “Core to this is actually trying to figure out what the problem is we’re trying to solve for. It isn’t entirely housing, it’s more appropriately the integrity of the system that has mushroomed, ballooned in the past couple of years.” Miller points to a ballooned system, a system experiencing exponential growth, but also a system that is failing to appropriately support the increasing number of international learners. This group of learners faces challenges ranging from navigating cultural differences, finding suitable housing, navigating unfamiliar education systems, difficulty finding employment, exploitation by employers, and struggling with English and French comprehension. News reports highlight far more dire situations, such as students facing disenrollment and deportation because of the alleged actions of postsecondary education agents abroad. Some learners have reported that agents have taken advantage of their lack knowledge of the Canadian immigration system, shared false information and fraudulent documents, and charged exorbitant fees for their services.<sup>5</sup> This has fuelled a growing

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- 1 This group also includes those enrolled in a program from a Canadian institution that is not located in Canada (also known as ‘offshore students’) and those studying online and living abroad. Statistics Canada, “Education Matters.” February 24, 2011. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-004-x/2010006/def/intlstudent-etudiantetranger-eng.htm>
  - 2 Statista, “Number of study permit holders with a valid permit in Canada from 2000 to 2022.” July 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/555117/number-of-international-students-at-years-end-canada-2000-2014/> and Pass-Land, Christian. “Integrity of immigration system at risk as international student numbers balloon, minister says.” *CBC News*, August 27, 2023.
  - 3 Kumar, Rahul and Clinton Kewley. “Quality, Cost and Time: The Iron Triangle of International Postsecondary Programs in Ontario,” *Journal of Thought*, Fall/Winter 2021, 20-38, 21.
  - 4 Statistics Canada, “International students as a source of labour supply: Transition to permanent residency.” June 23, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202100600002-eng>
  - 5 Singh, Satbir. “Dozens of students who could be kicked out of Canada say they were duped by immigration agents in India,” *CBC News*, March 17, 2023.

concern about the forgery of acceptance letters and enrollment documents used to obtain student visas in the process of international student recruitment. Other reports indicate that some female international students are afraid to report sexual assault, fearing reprisal and deportation from Canada.<sup>6</sup>

Ontario is the most popular destination for international students in Canada. In 2022, 52% (289,835) of all study permits were issued to learners going to Ontario institutions, followed by British Columbia with 19% of total study permits.<sup>7</sup> Ontario is an attractive destination based on the sheer number of postsecondary institutions in the province: 56 publicly-assisted Indigenous institutes, colleges, and universities (9 Indigenous Institutes, 24 colleges, and 23 universities), 513 private career colleges, and 6 private universities. Ontario is also home to the largest urban, cultural, and economic centres in Canada, making it an attractive destination for both post-graduate immigration and employment opportunities. As many learners who participated in our interviews indicated, familial connections to Ontario (specifically the Greater Toronto Area) fueled their desire to study in the province. Recognizing the significant role that Ontario plays in the international learner ecosystem, eCampusOntario, a provincially-funded non-profit organization that leads a consortium of the province's publicly-assisted Indigenous Institutes, colleges, and universities to further digital transformation in higher education, has engaged in research on international learners in Ontario. As a convening power in the Ontario postsecondary sector, eCampusOntario is in

a unique position to work with the sector to understand the needs of international learners and identify solutions to some of the problems they face. Between July and October 2023, the eCampusOntario Research and Foresight unit engaged with international learners at the undergraduate level at Ontario's publicly-assisted colleges and universities to identify the problems they face and to explore possible digital by design solutions.

The data collected by the research team reveals that undergraduate international learners in Ontario face a myriad of problems at different stages in their learner journey. We spoke to learners about five pivotal moments in their journey: researching and applying to Ontario postsecondary institutions, applying for a study permit or other visa, arriving in Ontario, studying in Ontario, and post-graduate pathways to citizenship in Canada. At each of these stages, international learners have reported information (and misinformation), communication, access, social, cultural, economic, employment, and educational barriers. Understanding these barriers from the international learner's perspective is of utmost importance to rectify these issues with digital solutions and improve the international learner journey. The voices of international learners are central to the digital transformation of Ontario's postsecondary sector and the future of Canada.

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6 Pottie, Erin. "Some female international students afraid to report sexual assault, says CBU students' union president." CBC News, January 11, 2023.

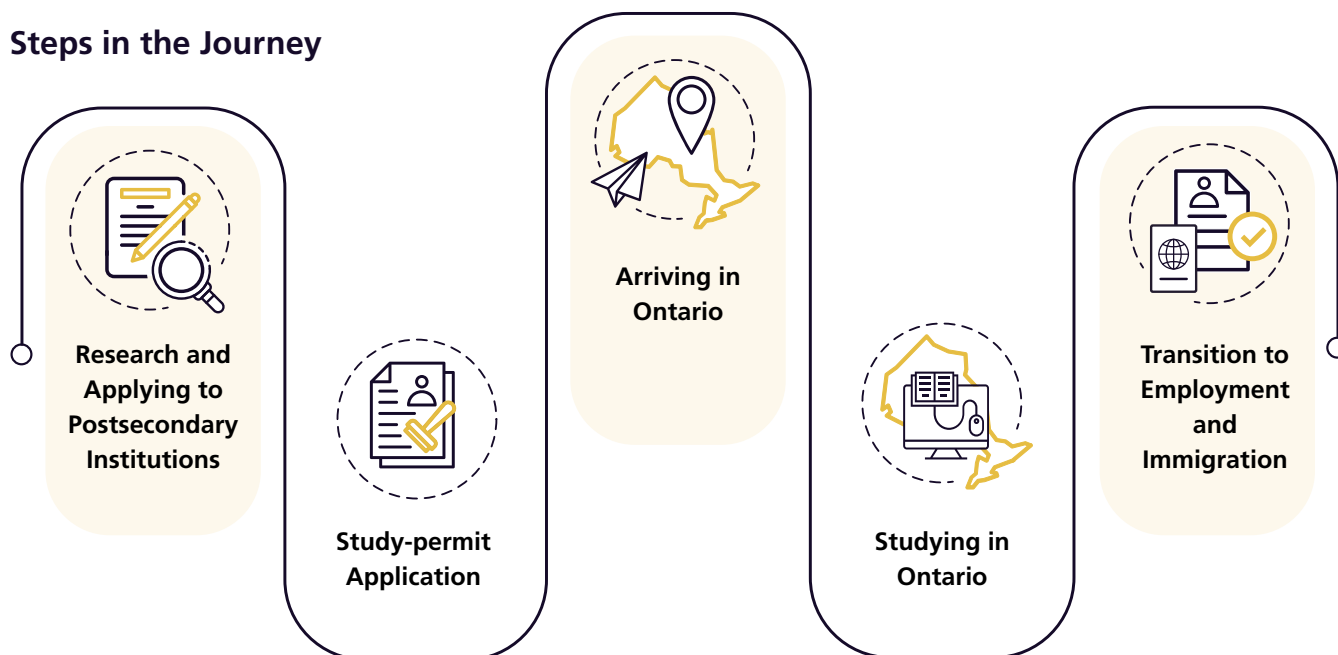
7 Packer, Helen. "Over 800,000 international students in Canada in 2022." Professionals in International Education (PIE) News. February 16, 2023.



# The International Learner Journey

For the purpose of this research and this report, the research team identified different steps or milestones in the international learner's journey. These steps, or the journey is referenced throughout this report. The journey for international learners coming to a new country is comprised of five major steps: researching and applying to Ontario institutions, visa applications, arriving in Ontario, studying in Ontario, and then finally the transition (or plan) to post-graduate employment and immigration.

## 5 Steps in the Journey



First, in the research and application to Ontario institutions step, an international learner makes the decision to study in Ontario and looks into programs to decide where to go. This can involve the hiring of an education agent, a common experience for our interview participants from India, to assist with or facilitate the application process. An international learner (potentially in conjunction with their educational agent) researches programs they are interested in and applies to them with the requisite documents over online portals. They then wait for acceptance, which can take from only a few days to months. In this time, the international learner is also conducting research on where they will be living and what they will need in anticipation for the next step.

Second, once the learner is accepted into a program at an institution in Ontario, they are presented with a Letter of Invitation from the accepting institution,

and are able to apply for a study-permit (sometimes called a visa). In this step, the international learner (and potentially their educational or immigration agent) produces the necessary documentation to complete the study-permit application, this includes; proof of acceptance to a Canadian designated learning institution, proof of identity, proof of financial support (\$10,000 not including tuition or \$833 per month of study), a letter of explanation (sometimes called a "study plan," which answers why they want to study in Canada, and that they understand their responsibilities as a student), academic transcripts, family information form, medical exam record, and passport sized photos. After submitting this documentation, learners start to investigate life in Canada such as locating housing and preparing to travel to Canada. Once approved, learners are permitted to travel to Canada. This process includes using the

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) website, visiting local or regional Canadian embassies/consulates/high commissions.

Upon arrival in Canada, learners are met by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), whereupon the international learner must produce their study permit and supporting documentation for a border services officer. These processes, especially the visa acceptance, can take time and thus can provide short timeframes for international learners to prepare to fly to a new place and find housing before classes start.

The third stage of the learner's journey starts after arriving in Ontario, before classes start. This step involves rapidly establishing a life in a new space, including finding a place to live and often the start of the search for part-time work. International learners have to navigate a new city or town and their campus, find groceries, learn a transit system, and purchase other necessities such as internet, mobile data, or technology devices.

Then, during the fourth step, classes begin, and the learner starts studying in Ontario. This stage often happens in tandem with the third stage as a learner continues to establish a life in a new country, but now has educational responsibilities included. The styles of teaching and learning in Ontario may differ from other places in the world and this can provide a barrier for international learners who are not used to that style of teaching. Moreover,

Ontario institutions have been utilizing hybrid and online modalities of teaching which international learners may be unprepared for. Other academic factors such as interacting with peers, approaching faculty for assistance, and navigating learning management systems and other items and processes used in teaching even in primarily in-person contexts in Ontario postsecondary classrooms may also prove challenging. Data from Statistics Canada reveals 76% of children of immigrants are first generation postsecondary learners.<sup>8</sup> While a data set does not exist specifically for international learners, it can be assumed that many international learners are also first generation postsecondary learners, who cannot be supported by family members on how to navigate the postsecondary environment.

Finally, once a learner has completed their program, they can apply for a post-graduation work permit (PGWP) which allows them to work in Canada full time. The post-graduation work permit may be valid between eight months and three years, depending on the length of the program of study they completed in Canada. However, understanding the process of applying for the PGWP and finding full-time work in their field can be difficult. For the purposes of this research, the journey of an international learner ends at this stage. While some research participants made the transition from the PGWP to Permanent Residency, we focused our attention on the transition from international learner on study permit to PGWP.

## Actors

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Along their journey in postsecondary education, international learners are exposed to a series of formal and informal actors who support their path. Actors include, but are not limited to, governmental agents, institutional employees, peers, teaching and learning communities, off-campus communities, friends, family, educational agents, employers, and other wraparound supports.

Each of these actors can provide learners with advice and information to support their journey, and may overlap their role at different stages of the journey.

Perhaps the most notable actor to emerge in the support of international learners through researching and applying to Ontario postsecondary

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8 Statistics Canada, "Postsecondary Education Participation Among Underrepresented and Minority Groups." 2011.



institutions is the educational agent, advisor, broker, consultant, or councillor. As per the Government of Canada's EduCanada, educational agents are "individuals or organizations located in Canada or abroad offering marketing, promotion, recruitment and other services in the education sector. The Government of Canada does not qualify, accredit, guarantee or endorse any particular agent."<sup>9</sup> Educational agents are commercial operations who either charge learners for their services (often called Consultants), or have a commission structure with a postsecondary

institution for finding successful candidates. Some Canadian institutions prohibit agents from directly charging students, and in turn offer them a proportion of the incoming student's tuition.<sup>10</sup> Because of this fee structure, some agents may be motivated to have students rapidly apply. Some learners expressed that they were encouraged by agents to apply to institutions after receiving fake information about the location of institutions, institutional demographics, job opportunities, and life in Canada.

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9 EduCanada.ca, "Education Agents." Updated June 9, 2023. <https://www.educanada.ca/study-plan-etudes/before-avant/education-agents.aspx?lang=eng>

10 Council of Ministers of Education, "The Role of Education Agents in Canada's Education Systems." December 2013, 2.

# Recommendations to Improve the International Learner Journey

This report has served to provide the voice of international learners on their journey through postsecondary education in Ontario. Learners indicated that they may not understand Canadian cultures, customs, regulations, and academic processes. International learners also indicated that they do not feel prepared for the Ontario postsecondary classroom, including online and hybrid modalities, digital fluency skills, communications, academic expectations, and learning styles. International learners feel lonely and isolated in a foreign country. By identifying these barriers and challenges, eCampusOntario was able to work with learners to discuss, ideate, and validate digital-by-design solutions. This section of the report presents those digital solutions, which have been grouped into three categories:

- **Learner Identified and Validated Solutions.** Solutions presented to eCampusOntario during interviews with learners, which were then validated by other learners.
- **eCampusOntario Identified and Learner Validated Solutions.** Solutions ideated by eCampusOntario during research findings and survey results, which were then presented to interviewed learners for validation.
- **eCampusOntario Identified Solutions.** Solutions ideated as a result of interviewed learners' initial impressions and questions, along with an environmental scan of other jurisdictions and best practices.

## Learner Identified and Validated Solutions

Solution	Timeline	Brief Explanation
Education Agent Portal	1 year	A portal with verified reviews of educational agents and listing of agents and affiliations with Ontario postsecondary institutions. This platform could facilitate the secure sharing of data and documents between prospective learners and their education agent.
All Encompassing Website with Validated Information and AI Chatbot	1.5 years	Learners sought an all-in-one place to find trusted and validated information to support all stages of the international learner journey. A reinvestment in the EducationOntario website (funded by the Virtual Learning Strategy) could serve this purpose. This platform could be supported by the use of an AI chatbot which provides answers to student questions around the clock.
Student Portals for Housing, Employment, and Mental Health	2.5 years	Portals to support and facilitate learner access to resources and professionals in the areas of housing, employment services, and mental health support. These are key areas of struggle that international learners identified.

# eCampusOntario Identified and Learner Validated Solutions

Solution	Timeline	Brief Explanation
Digital Fluency Micro-Credential	1 year	During the third round of funding for the Virtual Learning Strategy, eCampusOntario and ContactNorth developed a micro-credential to support the improvement of learner digital fluency skills to succeed in online and hybrid learning. A reinvestment and further promotion of this program to meet the specific needs of international learners has been supported by international learners themselves.
Study in Ontario Micro-Credential	1 year	The creation of a micro-credential to support the social and cultural acculturation of international learners. Topics could include the history of Canada and Indigeneity, relevant laws (especially employment and tenant rights), taxation, daily life, and social-cultural norms.
Open Education Resource Uptake	1 year	The use of OERs at postsecondary institutions alleviates financial strain on learners. A continued investment in eCampusOntario's OpenLibrary to continue outreach and uptakes efforts is recommended.
Digital Peer Mentorship	2 years	Traditional international peer mentorship programs do not account for the realities of online and hybrid learning where students no longer attend a centralized campus. Infrastructure to facilitate access to an international mentor, anywhere in the province, would alleviate some of the isolation felt by international learners.
Digital Credentials and Virtual Wallets	2.5 years	Following eCampusOntario's 2022-2023 research on digital credentials and virtual wallets, we discovered that micro-credential learners are receptive to digital credentials and virtual wallets. <sup>11</sup> Learners indicated how they could see these solutions being useful when applying for post-graduation work permits and permanent residency, if IRCC, other government agencies, and employers would be willing to accept digital credentials.

11 Hughes, Alexander Travis, Graeme Cannon, Laura Viselli, Elisa Arnold, and Rocío Chávez Tellería. "Wallets, Passports, Portfolios, Credentials: What Learners Want in a Virtual Education Wallet." eCampusOntario, March 2023.

# eCampusOntario Identified Solutions

Solution	Timeline	Brief Explanation
<b>Working Group on International Learners in Postsecondary</b>	<b>0.5-1 year</b>	This working group could bring together all parties working towards solutions for international learners in Ontario's postsecondary sector. By meeting quarterly, this council could convene on issues and collaborate on solutions to ensure that work is not being completed in siloed environments. Potential parties to include in this council range from eCampusOntario Members (particularly Student Affairs, International Learner Support divisions), representatives from Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship Canada, Global Affairs Canada, Council of Ontario Universities, Colleges Ontario, Indigenous Institutes Consortium, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, Canadian Federation of Students, College Student Alliance, Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, and other interested provincial and federal ministries.
<b>Blockchain Acceptance Letters</b>	<b>1 year</b>	In late October 2023, the Government of Canada announced changes to the International Student Program, most notably requiring designated learning institutions to confirm each applicant's letter of acceptance with IRCC to ensure that study permits are only issued to those with genuine acceptance letters. <sup>12</sup> By building a website where Ontario's Indigenous Institutes, colleges, and universities can send out blockchain-held letters of invitation, acceptance, and other important documentation, institutions, learners, and immigration authorities can ensure the security of these practices. A website where the sender (the institution), the receiver (the learner), and the document can be automatically verified as legitimate is a simple solution to a large problem.
<b>Supporting the Re-Calibration of the Post-Graduation Work Permit</b>	<b>1 year</b>	In late October, 2023, IRCC will "complete an assessment of Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) criteria and begin introducing reforms to better calibrate it to meet the needs of the Canadian labour market, as well as regional and Francophone immigration goals." <sup>13</sup> As part of eCampusOntario's efforts on the Micro-Credential Portal and collecting occupation-based data, eCampusOntario can provide IRCC with data about the Ontario labour market and the educational pathways required to support regional and Francophone immigration, and labour gaps.

12 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Changes to International Student Program aim to protect students." October 27, 2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/10/changes-to-international-student-program-aim-to-protect-students.html>

13 Ibid.

Solution	Timeline	Brief Explanation
eCampusOntario Policy Work	2 years	eCampusOntario needs to invest in a policy unit, supported by policy analysts, tasked to create briefings and respond to federal and provincial policies which impact the postsecondary ecosystem. This would include an emphasis on international learners, technology, employment, funding, economics, budgets, and other integrated policies. The Research and Foresight team at eCampusOntario should employ foresight research methodologies to understand the future of educational policy in Ontario.
Labour Market Connectivity and a Study and Stay Program	2 years	We recommend the creation of a study and stay program, similar to what has been created by EduNova, a co-operative industry association of education and training providers in Nova Scotia, which provides participants with enhanced one-on-one and group support throughout their final year of study, a managed mentorship component, career supports, networking, employer connection development, community integration, immigration support, and entrepreneurship opportunities. eCampusOntario could leverage past work on labour market connectivity to create a Study and Stay program.
Mandatory Licensing of Agents	2+ years	The educational agent industry is unregulated, non-transparent, and have committed fraudulent acts. eCampusOntario encourages that Ontario postsecondary institutions and federal and provincial governments consider mandatory licensing of educational agents and provide transparent rules and regulations governing their work that are made accessible and easy to understand for learners.
Co-Curricular Micro-Credential Framework	3 years	Co-curriculars provide learners with socialization and tangible skills, which can benefit their path to post-graduate employment. By creating a co-curricular micro-credential framework, a province-wide system of digital credentialing could be created for co-curricular participation. A shared set of skills, competencies, and assessment could be established. This would present international learners with incentive to participate in these activities and support the transition to employment.
Synchronizing Immigration and Education Policy		The lines between education and immigration have been blurred at the educational, economic, immigration, and labour policy level. Federal and provincial governments need to stop conflating these policy areas and understand international learner policy as all-encompassing subject matter requiring synchronized solutions.







# Conclusion

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This project is the result of a survey of and interviews with international learners who have studied at or are studying an undergraduate, degree, or certificate program at a publicly-assisted Ontario college or university. Learners revealed the variety of barriers they face along their learner journey, from researching and applying to institutions, to their visa application, through studying in Ontario, and post-graduate plans. The results of this research have informed a series of solutions, which could be implemented by the sector in partnership with other institutions, provincial and federal governments, and other valued stakeholders.

The research team recognizes the need for further research related to this project. While research on undergraduate-level degree, diploma, and certificate revealed a series of barriers that are unique to this group of learners, common themes such as housing, employment and loneliness may also impact other learners. Further research with international graduate students, lifelong

learners, re-skilling learners, and equivalency-learners is required to understand the entire scope of the international learner journey in Ontario. For example, mature international learners may encounter different problems related to the immigration of family members, the supports needed for family members, the need for a flexible classroom to support school-life balance, or re-skilling to enhance prior education. Further research on these learners may present new opportunities for digital solutions or ways to enhance the solutions presented in this report.

The international learner faces many barriers through their postsecondary journey in Ontario. This report has presented a series of digital-by-design solutions to reduce some barriers and improve their journey. Including international learner voices was paramount to the design of these solutions and is imperative to continue this dialogue through the design, implementation, and piloting of all solutions.



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