RESEARCH BRIEF NO. 2

International Students as a Vital Part of Canada's Talent Pipeline

August 2026

Overview

Canada's education system, spanning primary and secondary schools, language programs, colleges, institutes, polytechnics, and universities, collectively supports learners in distinct and complementary ways across a wide range of disciplines and areas of study. From certificates and diplomas to undergraduate degrees, master's programs, doctoral training, and postdoctoral research, each level of study contributes distinct and essential skills, knowledge, and innovation that drive Canada's economy and strengthen its society.

International students across all stages of study are an integral part of this ecosystem. Throughout their studies, they acquire high-quality Canadian credentials, develop official language skills, and gain valuable cultural, social, and professional experience. Many return to their home countries after their studies, becoming leaders and champions of Canada there. Others apply to stay in Canada, and alongside Canadian graduates, play a vital role in meeting Canada's current and future workforce needs, advancing research and discovery, strengthening communities, and driving economic growth.

The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) conducts a biannual survey of current international students (ISS) in Canada. In 2025, CBIE paired the ISS with a survey of international alumni (IAS) who studied at Canadian colleges, institutes and universities. The data below provides a snapshot of the experiences and contributions of international students and alumni to Canada's labour market.

Working while Studying

While studying is the primary motivation of international students in Canada, many seek out work opportunities during their studies to build their professional skills, gain hands-on experience and to help support themselves financially. Like Canadian students, many international students reported that they struggle with higher-than-expected costs of living.

International students are legally permitted to work up to 24 hours per week off campus and full-time during study breaks. 57% of international students surveyed in 2025 indicated that they were working during their studies, up from 48% in 2021. Students in rural areas were more likely to work during their studies (69%) than their counterparts in urban areas (56%).

39% of international students who work while studying reported that their jobs were relevant to their career goals, with significant variation by level of education and geography. 50% of graduate students reported that their job was related to their career goals, compared to 34% of undergraduates and 36% of college students. International students in urban areas were more likely to find work that aligned with their career interests (40%) than those in rural areas (29%).

73% of international students found it challenging to find a part-time job during their studies. These challenges are not unique to international students; they mirror broader trends affecting youth employment overall. In fact, unemployment among students reached 17% in September 2025[1], underscoring the highly competitive job market faced by both domestic and international learners. Even in these conditions, only 37% of students reported using institutional services like career counselling, resume/CV assistance, and interview coaching.

57%

of respondents were working part-time during their studies.

22%

of respondents were working are on-campus.

19%

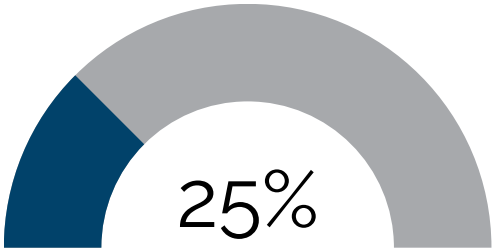
of respondents were working for more than one employer.

1 Statistics Canada: Youth faced a challenging labour market in the summer and into September https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/8640-youth-faced-challenging-labour-market-summer-and-september, October 28, 2025

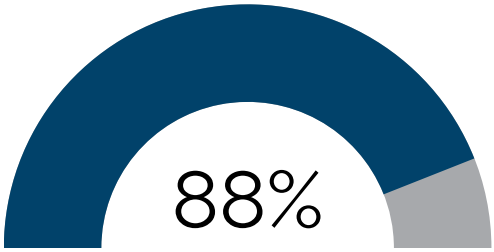
Work-integrated learning (WIL)

International students reported that work-integrated learning (WIL) was a key consideration when choosing a program. Accordingly, participation rates in WIL have continually increased since 2021.

College students exhibit the highest participation rates (32%), followed by university undergraduate students (25%), while approximately 20% of graduate students report participating in these programs. The survey also found variations in participation rates by region, with students in Ontario reporting the highest participation rates at 30%, and students from Quebec reporting the lowest participation rates at 20%.



of respondents participated in a work-integrated learning experience during their studies.



of international alumni who had a WIL experience felt that it was important in securing work post-graduation.

Of the surveyed alumni who participated in co-op or experiential learning during their studies, 88% felt that their experience was important in securing work. Respondents who are still in Canada (39%) are almost twice as likely as their counterparts who left Canada (22%) to have completed WIL during their studies. Similarly, those who are currently in Canada are much more likely (66%) to indicate that their WIL was important to securing their employment post-graduation.

Intention of Entrepreneurship

The 2025 survey found that 25% of students were considering entrepreneurship as a career path, with nearly three-quarters of this group intending to pursue permanent resident status. Furthermore, creating more conducive and transparent pathways to permanent residence for those who want to start businesses could help Canada fully realize this talent pipeline and strengthen its innovation economy.

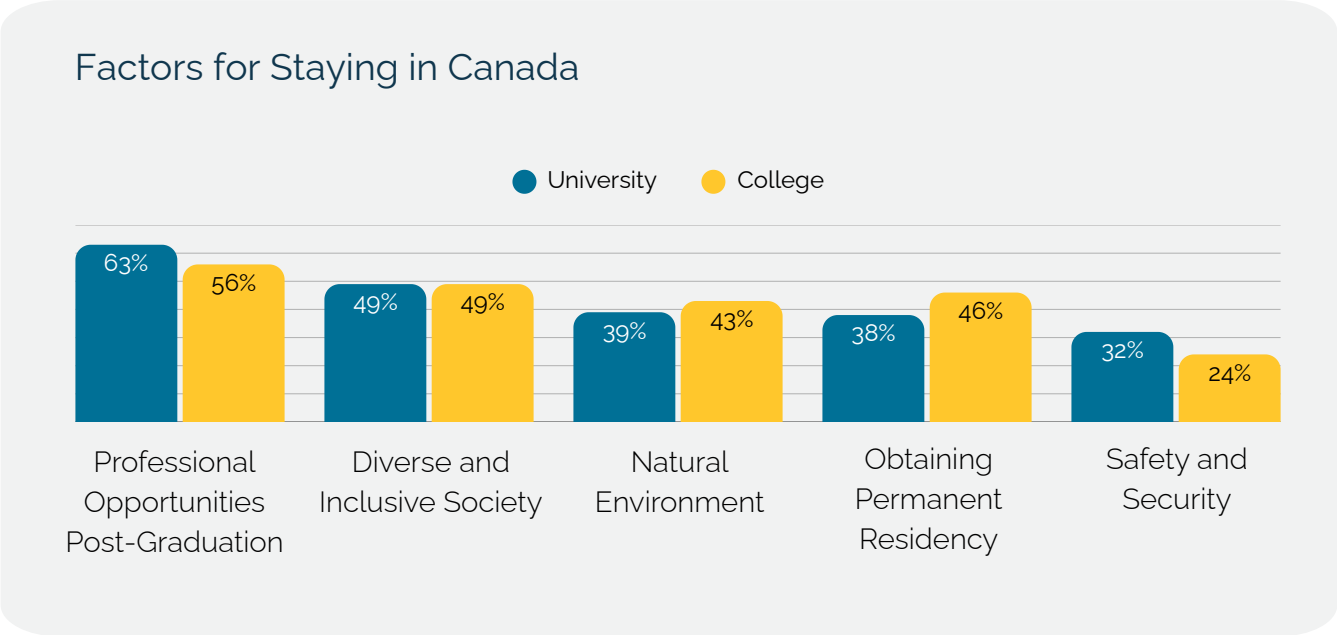
The survey saw significant variations in entrepreneurship intentions by level of study, field of study, and country of citizenship. At 35%, college students were most likely to plan to become entrepreneurs after their studies, followed by undergraduate students (22%) and graduate students (19%). Students from Nigeria (39%), India (30%) and Iran (30%) were much more likely than students from other countries to want to start their own businesses.

25%

of respondents were considering entrepreneurship as a career path.

Choosing to Stay in Canada Post-Graduation

Professional opportunities after graduation were the primary driver of retention, cited by 60% of alumni, underscoring the importance of strong labour market alignment. However, decisions to stay are shaped by a broader combination of lifestyle and location factors. While employment remains the strongest pull, these findings highlight that retention ultimately depends on a combination of economic opportunities and supportive social and policy conditions.

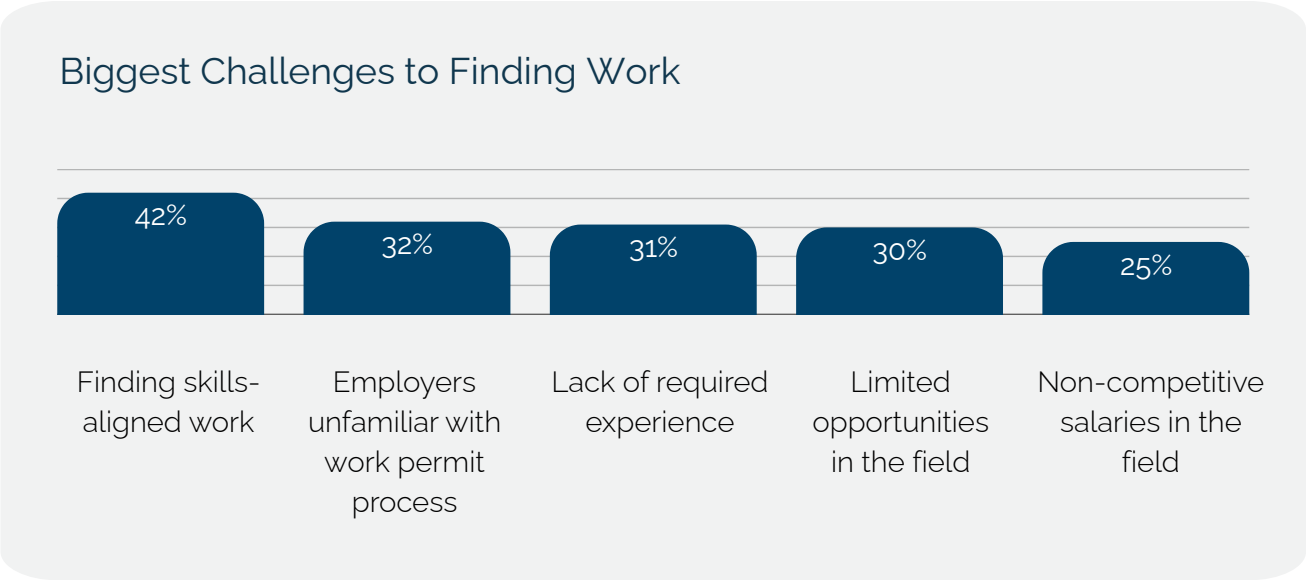


The 11% of respondents that chose to leave Canada after graduation did so primarily because it was never their intention to stay (32%), highlighting the opportunity that a Canadian education offers as a pathway to global mobility rather than long-term settlement.

Among respondents who had intended to remain in Canada but ultimately left, the most commonly cited reasons were returning for personal or family reasons (27%), being unable to find employment related to their studies (23%) and not finding a position that matched their skills and experience (19%). These findings suggest that strengthening labour-market alignment is critical not only to supporting the success of international graduates, but also to maximizing their contribution to Canada's workforce and broader economy.

Finding Employment Post-Graduation

69% of international alumni reported finding employment within six months of graduation, with 70% reporting that finding work after graduation was either challenging or very challenging.



Graduates from business and computer science programs were most likely to report finding work challenging at 75% and 82%, respectively. Graduates in education and social sciences were most likely to report no challenges in finding work at 36% and 34% respectively. The survey found no significant difference in the responses of university and college alumni when it came to finding post-graduation employment.

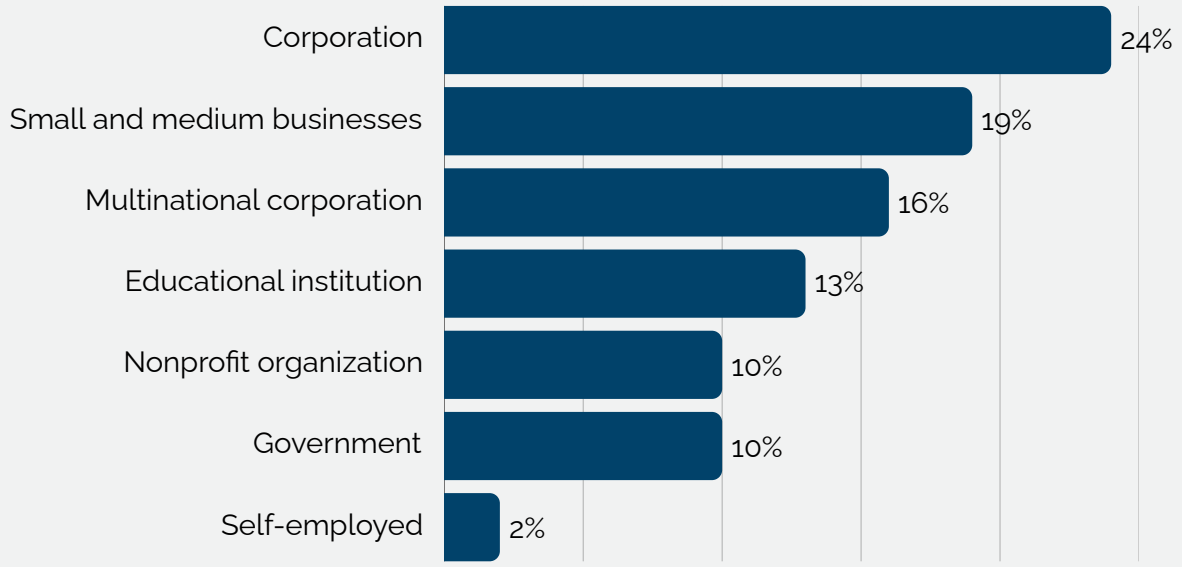
The survey did find, however, that many alumni were not aware of institutional services to support their transition into the workforce, such as career counselling, resume writing and interview coaching (23% unaware), alumni networks (30% unaware), internship or new graduate placement programs (36% unaware). Increasing awareness and uptake of these services could help address some of the employment-related challenges experienced by international graduates.

Type of Work

Over half of employed alumni respondents are working in the Canadian city in which they studied, 34% are working in another Canadian city, 10% in their home country and 2% in a country other than Canada or their home country. This points to international education as a helpful recruitment tool for communities looking to reverse declining populations or address local labour needs.

International alumni in Canada work in all types of businesses and institutions across Canada's economy. Most respondents are employed in permanent roles (70%), while just over one in five (21%) hold contract positions. The survey found significant differences in position type between recent graduates and those who graduated in 2023 or earlier. Those who graduated in 2024 or 2025 were more likely to work in internships or contract roles than those who had been in the workforce for a longer period.

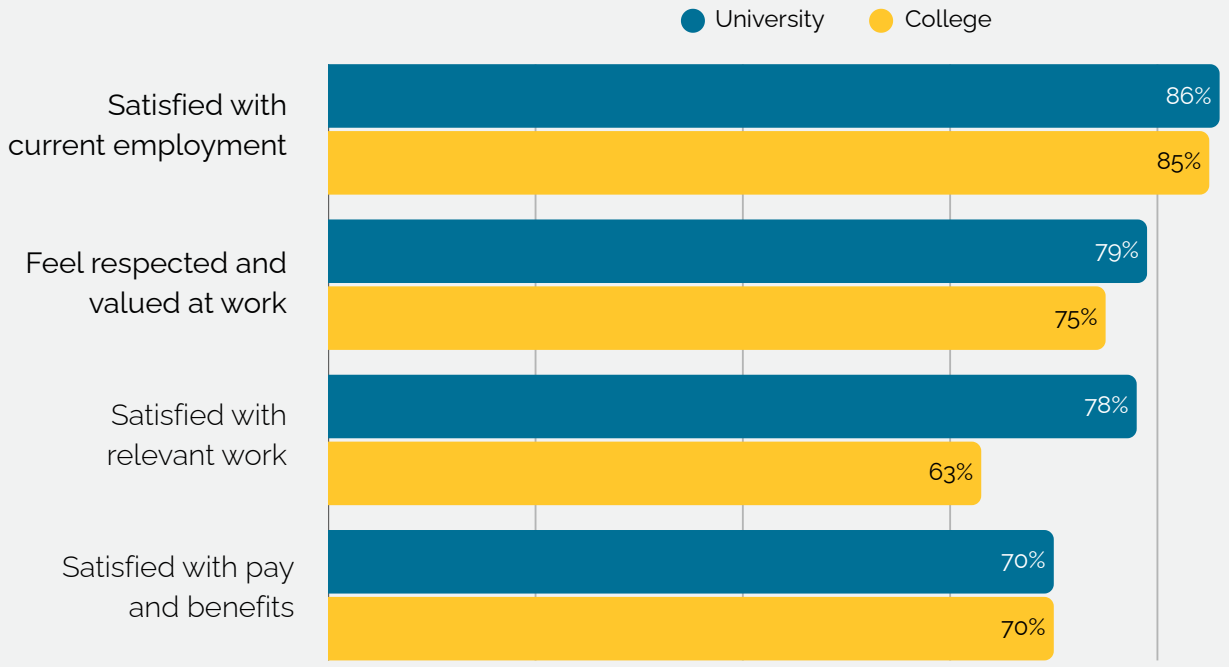
Type of Employment



Labour Market Outcomes

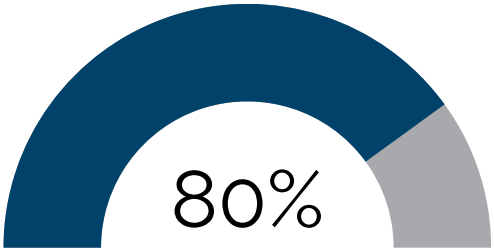
The survey findings demonstrate that international alumni are making a strong and tangible contribution to Canada's economy. With 80% currently employed, the results point to positive labour-market outcomes among graduates. Importantly, 71% are working in jobs related to their field of study, suggesting that many are applying the skills and knowledge gained through their Canadian education directly in the workforce. Their employment experiences are also largely positive, with 85% of respondents saying they are satisfied with their current work, 70% are satisfied with their pay and benefits and more than three-quarters reporting feeling respected and valued in their workplace.

Satisfaction with Work

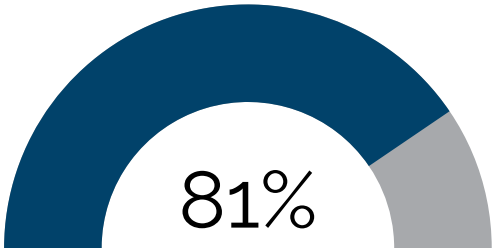


The Value of a Canadian Credential

The survey found 80% of international alumni are satisfied with their study experience in Canada. University educated respondents were slightly more likely to report being satisfied (82%) than college graduates at 77%. Overall, 87% indicated that Canada was a welcoming country and 86% said it is an inclusive country.



of international alumni reported being satisfied with their study experience in Canada.



of respondents found their Canadian credentials valuable for securing employment in Canada.

Canadian postsecondary institutions appear to be strongly aligned with the domestic labour market, as reflected by the 81% of alumni who found their Canadian credentials valuable for securing employment in Canada. The value of a Canadian credential appears more context-dependent outside of Canada, although a solid majority (68%) still recognize its value in their home country.

Nearly nine in ten indicated that Canada was a welcoming and inclusive country.

Conclusion

CBIE's 2025 survey results highlight that Canada's international education system continues to deliver strong outcomes for both students and the broader economy, but the findings point to important areas for improvement. International students and alumni are highly satisfied with their experience, view Canada as welcoming and inclusive, and are contributing meaningfully to the labour market across sectors and regions. Furthermore, Canadian credentials are widely seen as valuable, particularly within the domestic labour market, reinforcing the strong alignment between post-secondary education and employer needs.

Retention remains closely tied to employment opportunities but is also shaped by broader factors, including quality of life and immigration pathways. Supporting international students as future workers, entrepreneurs, and community members will require a coordinated approach that integrates education, labour market access, and clear, welcoming pathways to permanent residence. Expanding work-integrated learning opportunities, improving awareness and use of institutional career supports, and strengthening employer connections are critical to improving outcomes.

Taken together, these findings reinforce that international students are not only learners but a vital talent pipeline. To fully realize their potential, they must be supported at every stage, from study to employment and long-term integration. This support will help them achieve their personal, academic, and career goals while strengthening Canada's economy, innovation capacity, and global connections.

Canadian Bureau for International Education

About CBIE

CBIE is a national, non-profit association dedicated to advancing international education in Canada. It supports Canadian education institutions in achieving their internationalization goals through advocacy, capacity building and partnerships. CBIE's institutional membership comprises 160+ colleges, universities, polytechnics, CEGEPs, language schools and school boards from across Canada.

The 2025 ISS was completed by 21,918 current international students attending 84 colleges, polytechnic institutions, and universities in 10 provinces. The alumni survey was completed by 5,524 alumni who attended 55 colleges, polytechnic institutes and universities in 9 provinces. For more information, please visit the CBIE website.

Suggested Citation

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