Trust Through Information

STRENGTHENING CANADA'S INTERNATIONAL STUDENT INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Part 1 of the Trust Through Information series

WES World Education Services

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Trust Through Information: Strengthening Canada's International Student Information Ecosystem

Introduction

This paper is the introduction to a research series designed to support cross-sector dialogue on strengthening integrity and accountability in the ecosystem of information provided to international students.

Each subsequent paper in the series elaborates on a single systemic challenge WES has identified, presenting the current state, desired outcomes, accountability mechanisms, and examples of good practice. To read the full series, please visit the WES website.

Improved Information, Stronger Outcomes

In recent years, major policy reforms have reshaped international education in Canada. Study permit caps, declines in approval rates, and revised post-graduation work permit (PGWP) and work-hour rules have led to greater uncertainty among international students.[1] Many students already in Canada report disappointment with their academic and post-study experiences.[2] Together, these trends undermine Canada's reputation as a top study destination.

Amid the many changes to the international student program, there has been little focus on a persistent pain point—the integrity of the international student information ecosystem.[3] This is a missed opportunity. Clarity, accuracy, and timeliness of information play a critical role in shaping international students' expectations, decisions, and outcomes. Circulation of misinformation about study in Canada, along with fraudulent practices by intermediaries, has been well documented.[4] Strengthening this ecosystem is a practical way to rebuild international students' trust in education and immigration systems and to improve student experiences across their study journey.[5]

1 https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/international-student-program-reform-more-information.html; https://www.cicnews.com/2024/12/year-in-review-whats-changed-for-international-students-and-post-graduation-work-permits-in-canada-in-2024-1249791.html

2 https://canadianimmigrant.ca/education/international-students/international-students-mental-health-crisis-canada; https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1406868

3 https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-ottawa-accused-of-failing-to-crack-down-on-unethical-immigration/; https://www.wes.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/WES-Brief-Accountability-and-Transparency-for-Students.pdf

4 https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-oct-24-2023/task-force-students-fraud.html; https://universityaffairs.ca/features/the-murky-world-of-unregulated-international-student-recruiters

5 https://www.caut.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/joint_recommendations_on_canadas_international_education_strategy.pdf; https://www.csagroup.org/news/canadas-international-education-system-needs-an-overhaul-where-to-from-here

The Canadian government and post-secondary institutions (PSIs) can significantly influence the level of information made available to international students. However, they are not fully leveraging this opportunity: Information gaps remain unaddressed, and online content is often confusing or poorly presented.[6]

International students have few other sources to turn to. Unlike other newcomers, international students and graduates are excluded from accessing federally funded settlement services, reliable and neutral parties that could explain options, make referrals, support integration, and reduce the risk of exploitation.

To fill the gap, international students turn to intermediaries and social media content creators that provide information that may appear clearer and more engaging than that of official sources. However, this information may be outdated or misleading, leaving many misinformed about study, work, and life in Canada.[7]

Reasons for Change

Weaknesses in the information ecosystem put Canada's ability to attract international students at risk and undermine the country's economic and immigration policy objectives. Risks include:

Student vulnerability and harm
International students cannot make informed decisions when they cannot find the information they need, or when information available to them is confusing or incorrect. False expectations can lead to disappointment, stress, and loss of invested time and money. Missing and incorrect information also increase the risks of fraud and exploitation.

Disconnect between study programs and labour market needs
Missing information creates an opportunity cost. Without good information about the labour market, international students may enrol in programs that sound promising but are not valued in the labour market.

Definitions

- *Information ecosystem:* The network of sources, channels, actors, and tools international students use to obtain and interpret information about studying, living, working, and immigrating
- *Information provider:* Any person or source providing information to international students
- *Official sources:* Government (federal, provincial, and territorial) and post-secondary institution websites and publications
- *Intermediary:* Any person or organization providing education or immigration advice or services to international students in exchange for payment (for example, recruiters, education agents, licensed immigration consultants, and unlicensed advisors)

6 https://knowledge.wes.org/canada-report-insights-from-international-students-in-canada.html
7 https://knowledge.wes.org/rs/317-CTM-316/images/wes-canada-report-in-search-for-information-insights-from-international-students-in-canada.pdf

This risks steering post-secondary program offerings towards those that attract international students, rather than those that respond to real demand.

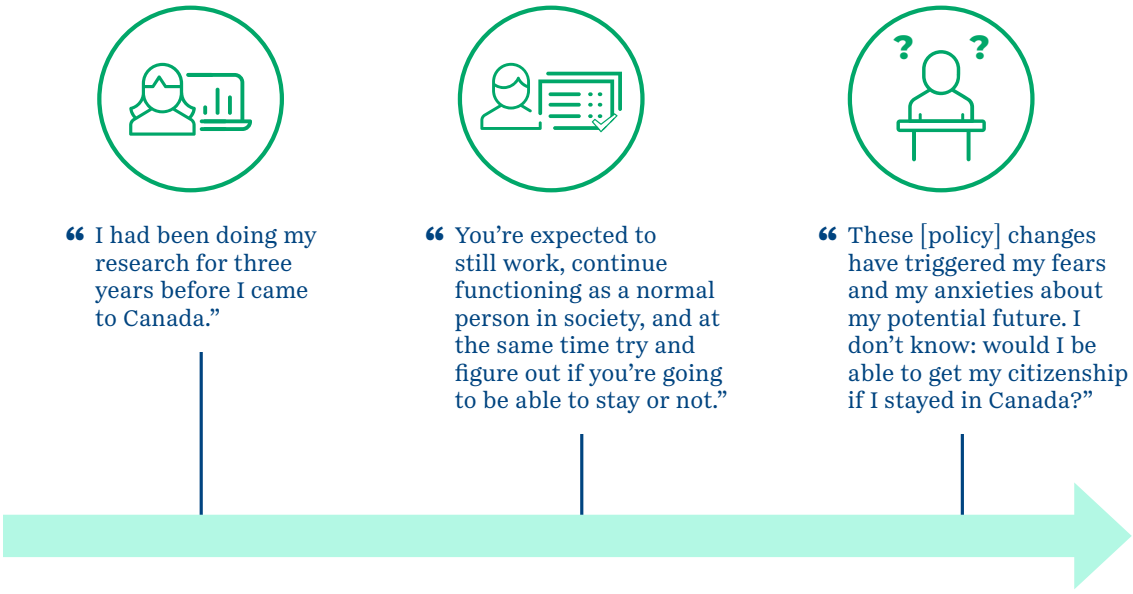
Policy ineffectiveness
The gap between what international students are told and what government policies actually deliver creates a cycle of disappointment and distrust that makes it increasingly difficult for Canada to attract the students it wants or achieve its broader immigration and economic objectives.

Global competitiveness
Countries like Australia, Germany, and the United Kingdom are investing in centralized, multilingual platforms to support international students. Without similar modernization, Canada risks falling behind in the global education market.

International Student Information Needs

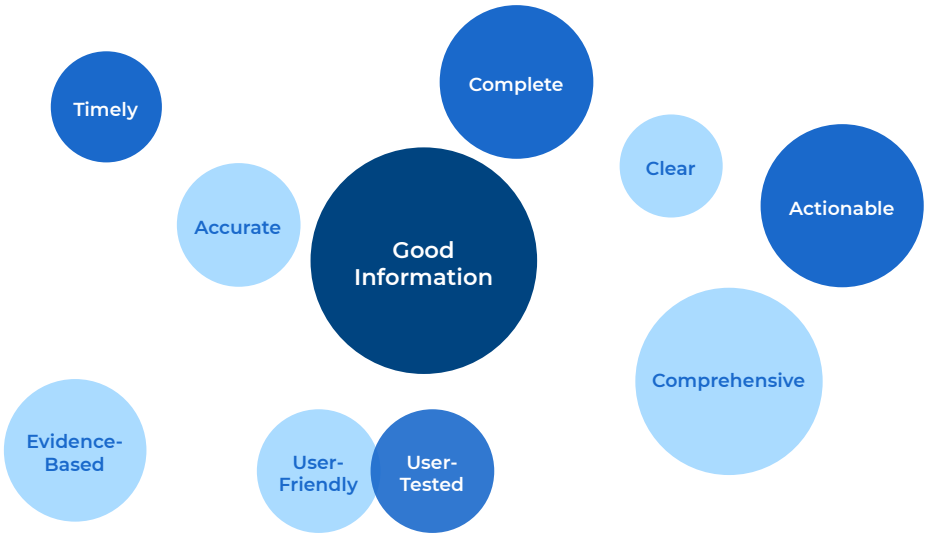
At each stage of their journey, from investigating where they want to study, to attending classes, to graduation, international students have a range of practical questions shaped by changing policies, personal circumstances, and labour market conditions (see Graphic 1).

Graphic 1



International students frequently look to the internet to help them find or verify information about study in Canada.[8] However, the online information ecosystem is marked by missing, confusing, or fragmented information. Some official channels still host outdated content. Unofficial channels often outpace official ones in publishing new or updated content, increasing the risk of misinformation.

Graphic 2: Characteristics of Good Information



Systemic Challenges

International students routinely face common systemic challenges to finding good online information. These include:

Information gaps and difficulties finding information

Official websites often lack information on key topics that matter to international students. In some cases, information may also simply be hard to find. Notable gaps in information availability:

- **Working with intermediaries:** International students often need information about how to identify trustworthy agents and how to report misconduct. They also need information agents' sanctioned scope of work.
- **Immigration and employment outcomes:** Students need to know where to find credible data, how to interpret it, and how outcomes may vary by study level, field of study, or region.
- **Labour market alignment:** Students need practical guidance that links fields of study to local job demand, entry-level roles, and realistic hiring pathways.

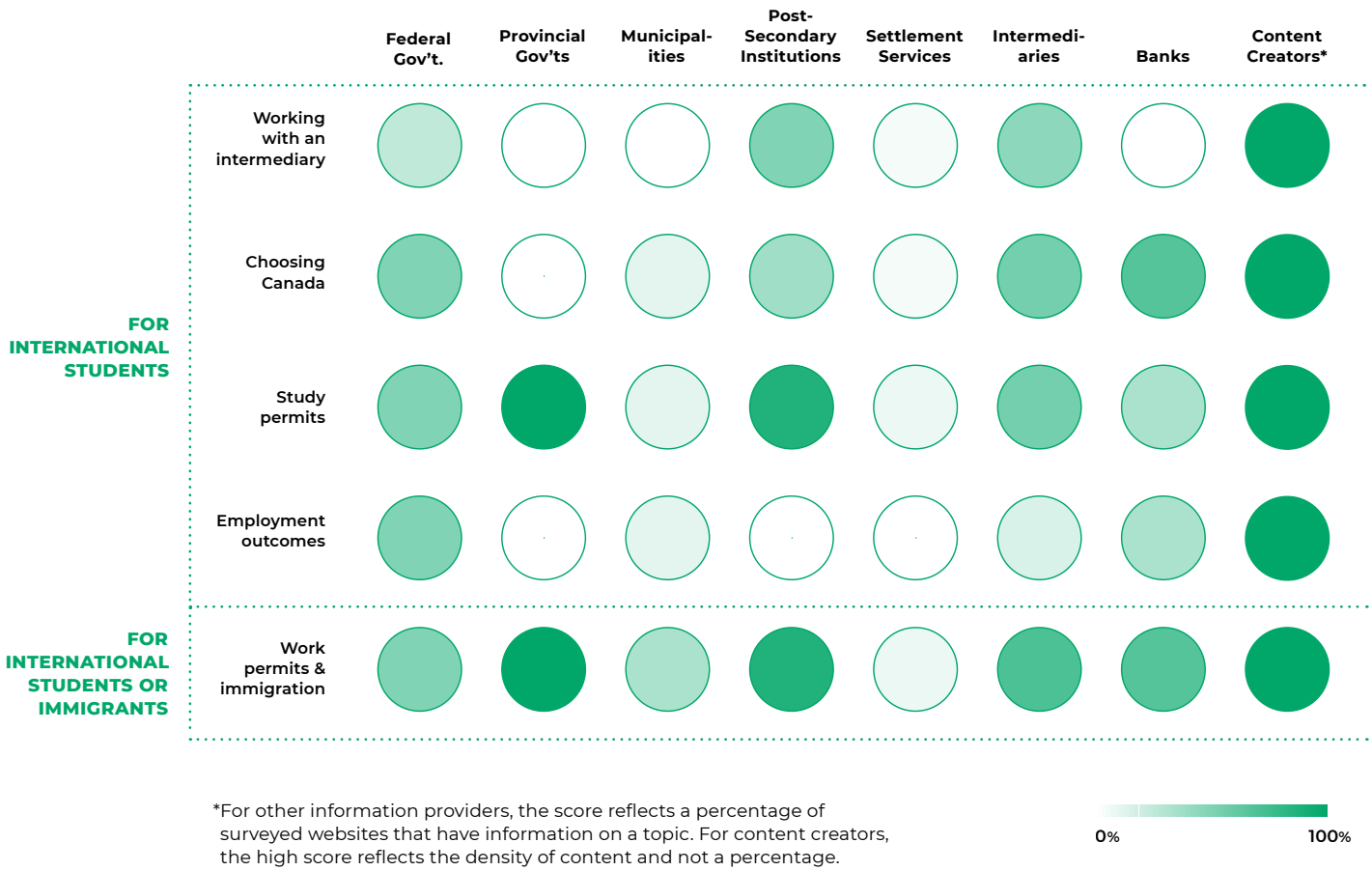
8 https://knowledge.wes.org/canada-report-insights-from-international-students-in-canada.html; http://choosing-canada.ca/

A fragmented, risk-prone ecosystem

Official sources have joint responsibility for providing information to international students, but no single actor is accountable. The result has been an information ecosystem that is crowded and unreliable. Many different players provide online information to international students (see Graphic 3), and these players vary in terms of their priorities, level of accountability, and effort in keeping information up to date. Even in topic areas where government and post-secondary institutions do provide information, it is often incomplete and unclear.

Many international students will crowdsource information or seek out non-official sources, such as agents, personal connections, or influencers, that provide information that is more personalized or digestible, and therefore more user-friendly but not necessarily accurate.[9]

Graphic 3: Prevalence of Online Information by Source Type



*For other information providers, the score reflects a percentage of surveyed websites that have information on a topic. For content creators, the high score reflects the density of content and not a percentage.

9 https://knowledge.wes.org/canada-report-insights-from-international-students-in-canada.html

Policy instability and ineffective communication of policy changes

Frequent changes related to study permits, work eligibility, PGWP criteria, and provincial immigration programs often outpace official website updates. Policy announcements made without immediate updates to corresponding webpages can foster the spread of misinformation:

- In many cases, outdated material remains online.
- Outdated content continues to be picked up and shared by blogs, forums, and AI-powered tools, which often scrape and summarize information without verifying its accuracy.
- Students may act on obsolete rules, jeopardizing their immigration status.

Outdated but persistent 'study and stay' advertising

For over a decade, international education in Canada was promoted as a reliable pathway to permanent residence. Recent policy changes (tighter PGWP rules, capped intakes, and shifting provincial nominee criteria) have made the path to permanent residence more complex and less predictable.

Yet fragments of the old narrative persist across many channels: government websites, post-secondary institutions, third-party marketing, and peer-to-peer channels. Beyond exposure to outdated information about staying in Canada post-graduation, prospective students are often flooded by optimistic messaging that downplays the competitive and conditional nature of immigration pathways. Meanwhile, credible data on immigration outcomes, like success in achieving a PGWP or transitioning to permanent residence, is not easily accessible for prospective or current international students.

This disconnect between advertising and reality fuels unrealistic expectations, contributes to dissatisfaction, and poses reputational risks to institutions and to Canada's broader international education brand.

Risks related to AI and circulation of misinformation

Generative AI technology makes information more accessible to international students but introduces new risks. AI tools trained on outdated, unofficial, or poorly structured sources may accelerate the circulation of inaccurate and misleading information. Meanwhile, it is easier than ever to create and share content that is engaging and appears authoritative but may be incomplete or outdated. As AI becomes more embedded in information searches, ensuring that official content is AI-ready (structured, current, and clearly sourced) is essential to reducing harm and restoring confidence.

Conclusion

To remedy the situation, Canada needs:

- Clear, accurate information on key topics from official sources, optimized for user experience and for discoverability by search engines and AI
- Coordination across Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), provincial governments, and post-secondary institutions to ensure that all priority topics are covered and information gaps are closed
- Accountability mechanisms to ensure information accuracy from official sources and from intermediaries such as legal representatives and education agents
- More opportunities for international students to provide feedback or report problems, and for international student feedback to be used as a performance metric

These priorities reflect Canada's digital service commitments and align with what international students say they need: fewer websites to navigate, simple language, and links to official sources for verification.[10] For a full list of proposed ways forward, visit the **WES website**.

10 https://knowledge.wes.org/rs/317-CTM-316/images/wes-canada-report-in-search-for-information-insights-from-international-students-in-canada.pdf

Methodology

This series analyzes the ecosystem of online information available to prospective, current, and former international students. The research involved four stages:

1. Systemic search for online information on a wide range of topics
2. Definition of a narrower scope for further investigation
3. Content analysis of online information collected within the narrower scope
4. Findings validation with professionals in the post-secondary sector and with international students

The project scope and examples of good practices were informed by literature review, insights from sector conferences, and conversations with key sector players.

Ecosystem Mapping Exercise

The ecosystem mapping exercise included online English-language information that is available without payment or login. The team collected most information between January and May 2025. Unless labelled otherwise, all quotes and screenshots were validated in December 2025 to ensure that the report content was still valid closer to the time of publication.

The first phase looked at who provided information related to eight topics:

1. Working with education agents
2. Visas and immigration (study permits and renewals, PGWP, permanent residence)
3. Employment outcomes
4. Reasons to choose study in Canada
5. Applying to colleges and universities
6. Practicalities of life in Canada
7. Social and cultural information about life in Canada
8. Career advice

Graphic 3 reflects what we learned from the first phase of ecosystem mapping.

In the remaining phases, the team narrowed the focus to the first three topics, based on the importance of those topics to international students. After capturing the online information, the team coded and analyzed the data using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software.

The intended audience varied by topic. For some topics, like study permits and renewals, the information was explicitly aimed at international students. For other topics, such as life in Canada or pathways to permanent residence, the team included information written for a broader newcomer audience but still useful to international students.

Given the large number of information providers, the team used purposive sampling to examine a subset of sources. In some cases, new sources were added because providers included in the original scope referenced information on websites of other providers.

The team validated these findings through comparison with academic literature and conversations with key sector players.

Inclusion Criteria

The team started by selecting eight post-secondary institutions (criteria below), and then, based on those institutions, identified municipalities and settlement service providers to include in the mapping exercise. The eight institutions also served as a starting point for selecting education agents to include. The team then added other education agents so the study would include those that did not necessarily hold a contract with a Canadian post-secondary institution.

The study focused on post-secondary institutions in Ontario and British Columbia, the two provinces with the highest international student enrolment. The team used a tool to randomly select four institutions with moderately high numbers of new study permits (between 6,000 and 10,000) and four with moderately low numbers (between 1,000 and 3,000) based on 2023 data from IRCC. This method purposely avoided outlier institutions with extremely large or very small volumes of study permits.

Chart 1: Summary of sources included in the ecosystem mapping exercise

Source type	Number of sources included	Inclusion criteria
Federal government	4	Websites that have information for international students or information about the labour market
Provincial governments	2	Provinces with the highest international student enrolment
Municipalities	9	Municipalities near the selected post-secondary institutions
Post-secondary institutions (PSIs)	8	Moderately high or moderately low numbers of study permits
Settlement service providers	25	Random selection of providers in the selected municipalities; additional services were included if they were referenced by other sources
Education agents	10	A random selection of agencies contracted by the PSIs, if the PSI listed its agents; additional agents included based on high rankings in search engine results
Legal representatives	8	Ranked highly in search engine results; additional representatives added if they were mentioned by international students in previous WES research
Blogs and newspapers for immigrants	3	Ranked highly in search engine results; additional representatives added if they were mentioned by international students in previous WES research
Other private companies	8	Based on search engine results, conversations with key sector players
Peers on social media	2	Search engine results
Influencers and content creators on social media	6	Ranked highly in search engine results or well-known by international student members of the research team

Limitations

The volume of information available online is too great to consider all of it. Our approach, which uses purposive and snowball sampling, produces results that are indicative but not fully representative and not generalizable to the entire online English-language ecosystem. Content behind a login wall was not included, and neither was information in other languages. Such content may reveal additional insights about what information international students receive when looking online.

Given the rapidly evolving policy environment and online information environment, some findings may reflect a particular moment in time, while others may remain valid for a longer period.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