

Ontario's private-college grads not finding jobs, provincial numbers show Add to ...

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SIMONA CHIOSE

Almost 40 per cent of the most highly rated private career colleges in Ontario appear to be failing to prepare students for the labour market, with a third of graduates at 58 out of 159 campuses unable to find any work six months after graduation.

The numbers, released by the provincial government this spring and analyzed by The Globe and Mail, raise renewed questions about whether public money should be used to help students attend the private institutions. Data were made public only for the schools the province has approved as eligible for financial aid.

The entire sector counts more than 600 college campuses, many of which are short-lived operations where students pay fees out of their own pocket.

Private colleges will have to meet new demands for accountability in coming years.

The publication of the data comes out of a 2011 provincial auditor-general's report that recommended Ontario track students' graduation and employment outcomes at the schools, which charge tuition of between \$10,000 and \$25,000 a year.

Starting next year, schools will have to show that they can meet 80 per cent of the average graduation and employment rates of publicly funded colleges in at least one out of every three years. If they fail to do so, new students won't be eligible for the Ontario Student Assistance Program.

Public colleges and student groups have long questioned why private institutions that lag the performance of their public counterparts have access to government funds.

"If you can afford to pay \$15,000 for a year-long accounting program instead of two, do you really need access to grant money that helps those folks with the least amount of disposable income? I don't know the answer to that question, but it's certainly one I would be expecting the government to be researching," said Linda Franklin, president of Colleges Ontario, the group representing all public colleges in Ontario.

Ms. Franklin added that she is not opposed to competition with the private sector. "If the government has ... extended OSAP in exchange for certain levels of agreements and measures, that's up to the government to pursue with career colleges if they are falling short," she said.

Private colleges argue that they meet a need for fast diplomas that appeal to students with families, immigrants upgrading credentials obtained abroad or laid-off workers training for new careers. Changes to financial aid announced in this spring's budget will make it easier for mature students to access grants and loans. That means the \$200-million the province spent providing OSAP to those enrolled in private postsecondary institutions will also go up.

"This sector has been operating for well over 100 years," said Paul Kitchin, executive director of Career Colleges Ontario. "There are clearly students who are best served by career colleges because of the size of the institution, the ages of students, or the fact that programs are delivered in a compressed nature so that students can be out in the work force quicker."

About 90,000 people now attend private colleges in Ontario, enrolling in courses to become paralegals, dental hygienists, Web designers, business administrators and many other skills. Some colleges have a single campus, while others are international businesses with several campuses in Canada and abroad.

Employment rates can vary between campuses of the same college. That was the case at Everest College, a U.S.-owned chain that went out of business last year. At its Newmarket, Ont., location, for example, 82 per cent of 2013 grads were employed, while only 66 per cent of students at its Scarborough branch were successful in finding a job. (Under a provincial agreement, Everest students were able to transfer to other schools.)

On average, students' employment rate in the sector is 71 per cent, with some campuses boasting that more than 90 per cent of students are working in their field.

But The Globe's analysis shows that the expensive fees are often a poor investment. Along with the high number of students who could not find any work, an even smaller number found jobs in the area they studied. Overall, less than half of employed students were working in their field of study. At some campuses of the CDI College, for example, only 34 per cent of grads had related employment.

At public colleges, 80 per cent of grads say their work closely matches their education. And roughly 84 per cent of graduates in the public college sector also find work after they graduate.

The relatively poor outcomes in the private college sector have led many to call for tighter control over the schools.

Private colleges "should have a curtailed place in the system," said Michael McDonald, executive director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. "If there is a public institution offering the same program, that is the one that should be promoted," he said.

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