

Explaining the Canadian Education System

Canada offers international students a range of educational pathways, from school through to university, college, technical and vocational education. Education is primarily the responsibility of provinces and territories, so terminology, structures and requirements can vary across the country.

School Education in Canada

Children typically begin school at the age of five or six with kindergarten before progressing through primary and secondary education. High school generally finishes at around the age of 18, although the structure varies between provinces and territories.

International students may be able to enter Canadian primary or secondary education at different stages, subject to the requirements of the relevant province, territory and school board.

Education After High School

After high school, students can choose from universities, colleges and institutes, as well as private career colleges. The programmes and qualifications offered vary by institution and province.

Institution type	Typical focus and opportunities
Universities	Academic study and research, usually including undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees.
Colleges and Institutes	Certificates, diplomas, applied and career-focused programmes and, in some provinces, degree programmes.
Private Career Colleges	Vocational and occupation-specific training. Recognition and programme status should be checked carefully.

Universities, Colleges and Institutes

Canadian universities provide degree programmes across a wide range of disciplines, with a strong emphasis on academic study and research. Colleges and institutes can offer certificates, diplomas, applied programmes and, in some provinces, degrees. They can suit students seeking applied learning and skills relevant to particular occupations and industries.

Private Career Colleges

Private career colleges offer vocational training focused on particular occupations and industries. International students should check the institution's provincial recognition and the status of the specific programme before applying.

Important Checks for International Students

International students should check that their chosen institution is a Designated Learning Institution before applying, as DLI status is normally required for a Canadian study permit.

Students who hope to work in Canada after graduation should separately check whether their specific programme is eligible for a Post-Graduation Work Permit. DLI status alone does not guarantee PGWP eligibility.

WorldStudentAdvisors can help students compare suitable Canadian institutions and programmes, check DLI and PGWP eligibility where relevant, understand entry requirements and manage the university or college application and study permit process.

The Key Message

Canada offers several routes through school and post-secondary education, but the system varies between provinces and territories. Universities, colleges, institutes and private career colleges can offer different combinations of academic, applied and vocational study.

International students should compare the qualification, institution, programme content and entry requirements carefully. They should also check DLI status and, where working in Canada after graduation is an objective, whether the individual programme is eligible for a Post-Graduation Work Permit.

Disclaimer: This information is provided in good faith and was believed to be accurate at the time of publication. Fees, dates, entry requirements, visa regulations and other information may change. Students should check current requirements before making any financial or study commitments.