

A photograph of a person walking away in a long, curved hallway with a tiled floor and a curved ceiling. A large, semi-transparent pink rectangle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title and date. The hallway has a modern, architectural feel with curved lines and recessed lighting.

# Accelerating Pathways into Film/TV:

## Microcredentials for Newcomers

December 2022

laboratory for  
**artistic  
intelligence**

# Introduction

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With a view to addressing labour supply issues assessed through the HOMAD study, Seneca College is working with the Laboratory for Artistic Intelligence to develop a specialized microcredential program for film/tv, centred around the training needs of newcomers.

This preliminary study was conducted to:

- Explore the problem space
- Identify the scope of training needed for learner success and satisfaction
- Understand adjacent challenges, e.g. entry and employment in film/tv unions

Apart from advancing the design of a microcredential program for newcomers, this report is also anticipated to inform strategic discussions around the development of the new Film Institute at Seneca College.

## Process: Key interviews

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In consultation with **Mark Jones**, Chair of the School of Creative Arts and Animation at Seneca College, the research process for this phase of work included the following:

- Meeting with **Todd Malarczuk**, a professor in Seneca's Teaching & Learning department who specializes in the development of microcredentials, and **Lara McInnis**, a professor as well in the Teaching & Learning department working in microcredentials, who brings past experience specializing in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for adult learners.
- Interviewing **Jonathan Ahee**, President of Stratagem Studios and former president of NABET 700-M UNIFOR and co-founder of the xoTO Schools program which focused on increasing gender and racial diversity in the film industry through coop education opportunities for high school students.
- Interviewing **Victoria Harding**, Executive Director of the Directors Guild of Canada (Ontario chapter), who is the first woman and the first DGC Ontario member to lead the organization which represents some 3000 creative and logistical production specialists. Harding previously worked as production manager from 2000-2013 and location manager from 1990-2000.
- Interviewing **recent graduates of Seneca's film/TV program** who are currently working in the film/TV jobs. Through internal sources at Seneca, two alumni currently employed in the screen-based industry were contacted and interviewed for their perspectives. Both are working in non-union jobs.
- Interviewing **newcomers** looking to enter the film/TV industry in Ontario. Two interviews were conducted but only one individual ultimately fit the criteria we were looking for. As the recent Seneca graduates we interviewed also fit this criteria, and as the Laboratory for Artistic Intelligence was engaged to draw on its extant newcomer research, further primary research with newcomers has been postponed until phase two of this project.

Transcripts of the conversations were coded for thematic analysis using Nvivo. Direct quotes from some of these stakeholder conversations have been included in the report.

## Context: Screen-based industry needs more skilled workers

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In 2021, Toronto set a new record for film and television production spending at \$2.5 billion and is [expected to exceed that in 2022](#). With this level of industry growth comes new demand for a skilled workforce. The HOMAD Ontario College Survey for Screen Industry Workforce Development was conducted in 2019 for the first time to quantify how Ontario colleges currently serve workforce development for the screen-based industries in Ontario and what the potential for growth might be.

Growth potential in terms of student demand was assessed through application trends and enrolment numbers. Growth potential in terms of industry demand is described in a section of the Survey report entitled, “Screen-Based Industries Background and the Coming Growth in Ontario.” The section cites the upward trend in economic activity in screen-based industries, including hefty investments into original content produced by streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime. The report also cites loss of income and jobs for the Greater Toronto Area in 2017, due to full capacity of studios. “The demand for global production services in screen-based content has, in recent years, outstripped supply, creating **a highly competitive environment for studio space and talent**. [...] A FilmOntario study indicated that the value of production the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) turned away due to the full capacity of studios was at least \$130 million. Such lost production could have led to the creation of 1,000 jobs.”

Accordingly, the City of Toronto has outlined key elements for **an expanded and sustainable screen-based industry sector, including studio expansion, workforce development, active advocacy, digital media, quality of life and opportunity**.<sup>1</sup>

“Based on current studio expansion announcements, and others likely coming online within five years, a conservative estimate of potential job growth from 2019-2024 would sit at about 10,000 full-time equivalent positions. But who will fill those jobs?”<sup>2</sup>

A labour shortage in crew positions risks resulting in Ontario’s screen industry losing productions to other film centres elsewhere in Canada and abroad in the short- and long-term.

<sup>1</sup>HOMAD Ontario College Survey, 2019, “Screen-Based Industries Background and the Coming Growth in Ontario.”

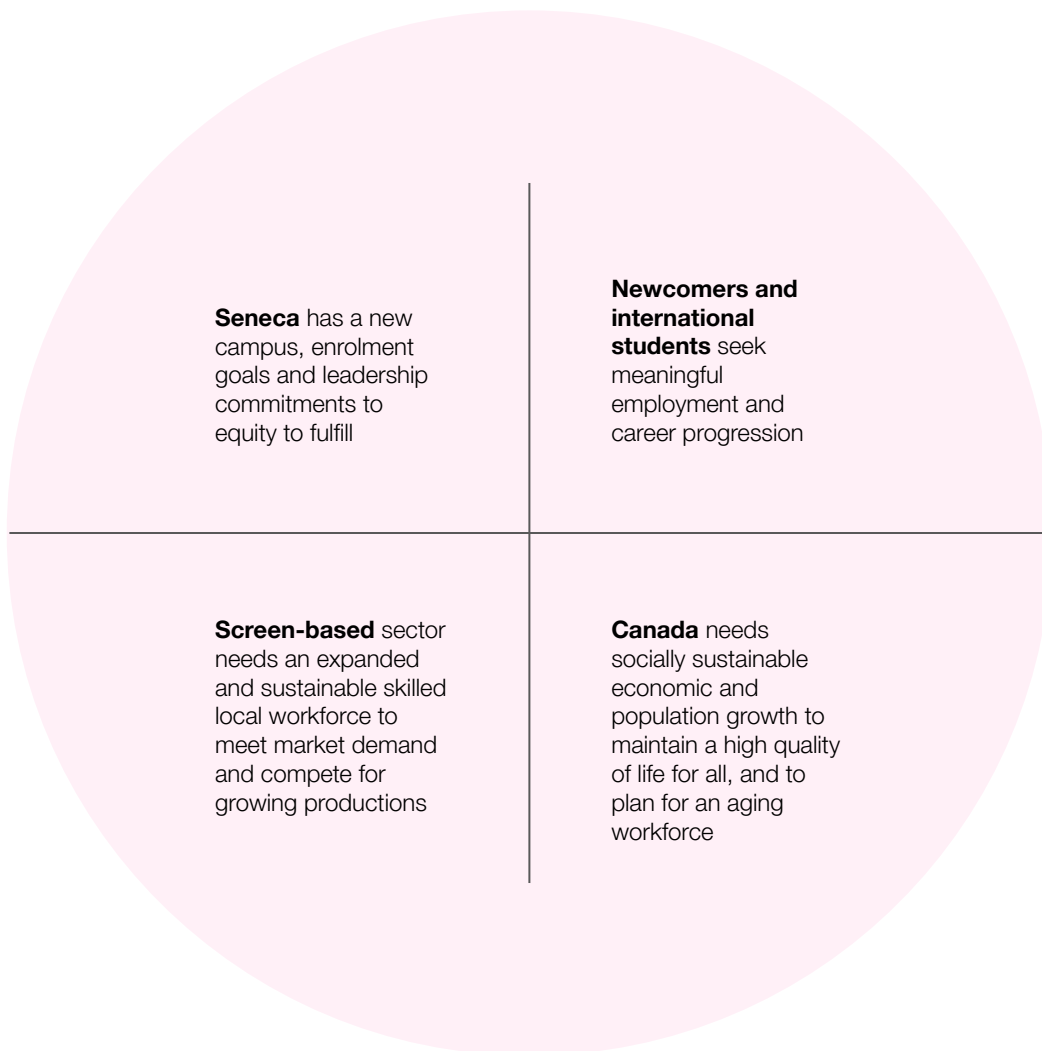
<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

# Opportunity: Newcomers seeking meaningful employment

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The HOMAD Survey report proposes a new sustainable screen-based industry workforce can be developed through “retention of current graduates, repatriation of professionals working in other jurisdictions, and adapting the skills of workers in other industries.” The report suggests that Ontario colleges are in the best position to meet the coming job growth, because of the colleges’ focus on “**applied learning**, appropriate-duration **flexible programming**, and **a system of responding** to industry needs.”

Accordingly, this research report by the Laboratory for Artistic Intelligence considers how **newcomers with direct and transferable work experience** could be accelerated into joining the screen-based industry in Ontario. The potential alignment is significant, as summarized in the visual below.



## Summary of Analysis: Stakeholder needs identified

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Newcomers	Unions	Producers & Studios
Need to know about relevant job categories and high-growth positions to train for	Need learners / job-seekers to know the full range of job categories available	Need all the job categories filled
Need assistance identifying transferable skills and adapting work experience	Need union members to welcome change, view membership growth as relevant to them, and be willing to mentor and vouch for new members	Need steady supply of competent crew members that can be promoted on the fly as productions scale and people get promoted
Those with international film/TV experience need 'retooling' and orientation to industry norms and standard workflows in Canada	Need steady supply of competent crew members that can be promoted on the fly as productions scale and people get promoted	Need to keep working with talented, competent and consistent crews to deliver high quality productions
Need opportunities to make industry contacts and demonstrate their technical & soft skills to people of influence	Need to see learners working on-set to accelerate pathways into membership and employment with a high level of trust and confidence	
Need advocacy and allyship for workers without Permanent Residency status yet	Need to eliminate barriers to developing apprentices and permittees into full fledged members	



## Examples: Aspects of the problem space

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<b>Prior on-set experience required</b>	<p>“Every single one of those producers was reluctant to try somebody that we had just trained in a training program. They only wanted people that have set foot on a film set. I’m not [devaluing] microcredentials or in-class learning. Obviously it’s valuable and it’s required. It’s just the producers want to know that somebody’s gone on a film set before.”</p>
<b>Need someone to vouch for you</b>	<p>“The signature is a dominating factor in [union membership] applications getting rejected all the time. [...] They want somebody else to say, yeah this person is good, this person can do your thing, because it gives them the illusion of certainty.”</p> <p>“My career growth has always been someone helping me to get a job. Getting the job at Whites. And if I didn’t go back to work at Seneca as a TA and meet Alex the other TA there, I wouldn’t have gotten that horse racing gig [which eventually led to the fulltime job I have now].”</p>
<b>Financial risks</b>	<p>The costs out there are extravagant and the risk is high. It’s about 5 grand a minute once you’re up and filming. So if I’ve hired somebody I don’t know that well, and they’re delaying me 5 minutes every hour over 12 hours a day, that gets accrued. At the end of the day, that gets very expensive for me as a producer. So they are reluctant to try somebody they don’t know.</p>
<b>Fear that union members will oppose diversity initiatives because new members would be their competition</b>	<p>“There’s a huge barrier, which the membership will tell you has nothing to do with race and everything to do with economics, which is that they’re a freelancer and anyone who comes through the door after me is competition. They don’t look at the fact that everyone who’s come through the door before them is all white and male usually. So when we start to talk about creating opportunities, they hear competition rather than equality. [...]”</p> <p>They are not opposed to these initiatives. They just don’t see the racism baked into the system, and they don’t see how they support it with their behaviour. What they’re thinking is from an economic standpoint: I need to work.”</p>
<b>Lack of work/life balance</b>	<p>“It can be brutal and it can be super brutal if you’re working 50 weeks of the year. So, we’re trying to move the needle on some of those issues. But with the growth and the expansion and the expectations getting bigger and bigger and bigger, it doesn’t really whittle down. It doesn’t seem to pare down. The producers never tell the writers to write to what the circumstances are.”</p> <p>“We see people burning out and having a tough time because the demand is so huge that people are actually getting bullied into taking jobs that they don’t want to take. And it’s because they need rest.”</p>

# Reflections: For an ambitiously sustainable strategy

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“Immigration accounts for **almost 100% of Canada’s labour force growth**, and, by 2032, it’s projected to account for 100% of Canada’s population growth.” ([Government of Canada](#))

Based on the stakeholder interviews conducted, and drawing on the Laboratory for Artistic Intelligence’s 5 years of research with newcomers to Canada, the following picture emerges:

1. Screen-based industry jobs have to be filled, at least in part, by new immigrants, refugees and international students. “Immigration accounts for almost 100% of Canada’s labour force growth.”
2. The screen-based industry, as a work culture, relies heavily on *who you know* which inherently poses barriers for newcomers to Canada, who bring ample international social capital, but need help developing local social capital.
3. Screen-based industry norms do not fulfill employment requirements that international students need to stay in Canada. It doesn’t matter how many hours a person works every week nor how much money they make; if it’s not salaried, it doesn’t qualify. That’s how antiquated and out-of-touch the Canadian immigration system is.
4. The screen-based industry is the new automotive industry. Screen-based unions, producers, and funders\* can educate and rally the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to modernize the definition of fulltime employment to keep up with the changing nature of work.
5. Screen-based program graduates want to work in the industry. They need more help getting in the door, getting on-set experience, and being sponsored and/or mentored along the path.
6. Screen-based industry jobs are not structured well for sustainability and retention. Sustainability, quality of life and work/life balance matter more than ever to today’s workers.
7. Everyone wants a better system that offers sustainable livelihoods and fulfilling pathways. From unions to studios to colleges to graduates and job seekers, everyone interviewed greeted Seneca’s initiative with enthusiasm and interest in taking part.

\*Unions: NABET, IATSE, DGC, ACTRA

Producers: CBC, CTV, Global, OMNI, and streaming companies with production presence in Canada (Amazon, Netflix, Crave)

Funders: Bell Media Fund, Shaw Rocket Fund, Canada Media Fund, Ontario Creates



# Recommendations: Some proposed solutions

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<b>1. Orientation courses</b>	<p>Intro to Film/TV in Canada</p> <p>OSLT for Film/TV in Canada</p>	<p>Communicate challenges and barriers as well as opportunities and rewards</p>
<b>2. Adaptation accelerator</b>	<p>Inventory of skills (competencies)</p> <p>Identify probable pathways to goals</p> <p>Curated guest speakers</p>	<p>20 students; registration process requires them to describe their competencies</p>
<b>3. Technical skills / retooling</b>	<p>Leverage existing microcredential and other training resources at Seneca College</p>	<p>E.g. moving to AVID from other software more commonly used in one's previous country</p>
<b>4. Information clinics</b>	<p>Collaborate on adjacent learning or supports needed, e.g. taxes for freelancers, strategies for work/life balance in the extreme work conditions of on-set life</p>	<p>Reduces the burden on newcomers to identify knowledge gaps and make sense of generalized information that isn't targeted for their needs in a language that may not be their first, second or third language</p>
<b>5. On-set experience</b>	<p>Could be pitched to unions as a 3-day experience when crew members with creative / production aspirations get to lead</p>	<p>Strategem has offered off-season studio time (Jan-March)</p> <p>Could be an expansion of DGC's outreach efforts</p>
<b>6. Industry network development</b>	<p>Building out network of peers, mentors and sponsors supportive of newcomers</p>	<p>A combination of surveys and in-depth interviews could help start to identify key nodes</p>
<b>7. Removing barriers</b>	<p>Increase allyship by decolonizing unions and <a href="#">modernizing immigration requirements</a></p> <p>Encourage collaboration through funding incentives for productions that participate in on-set demo days, increased apprenticeships, allyship training opportunities for crew</p>	<p>Further research needed to review pre-existing resources and attempts to decolonize unions</p> <p>Meet with funders to connect this work with their efforts to advance equity, diversity and inclusion</p>

## Conclusion: A situation ripe for change & transformation

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Beyond training learners, Seneca College must play a crucial role in helping to connect and clear pathways for newcomers to enter and move through the screen-based industry, and for graduates to be able to stay, work and make their home in Canada.

Stakeholder conversations reveal an important gap in the system:

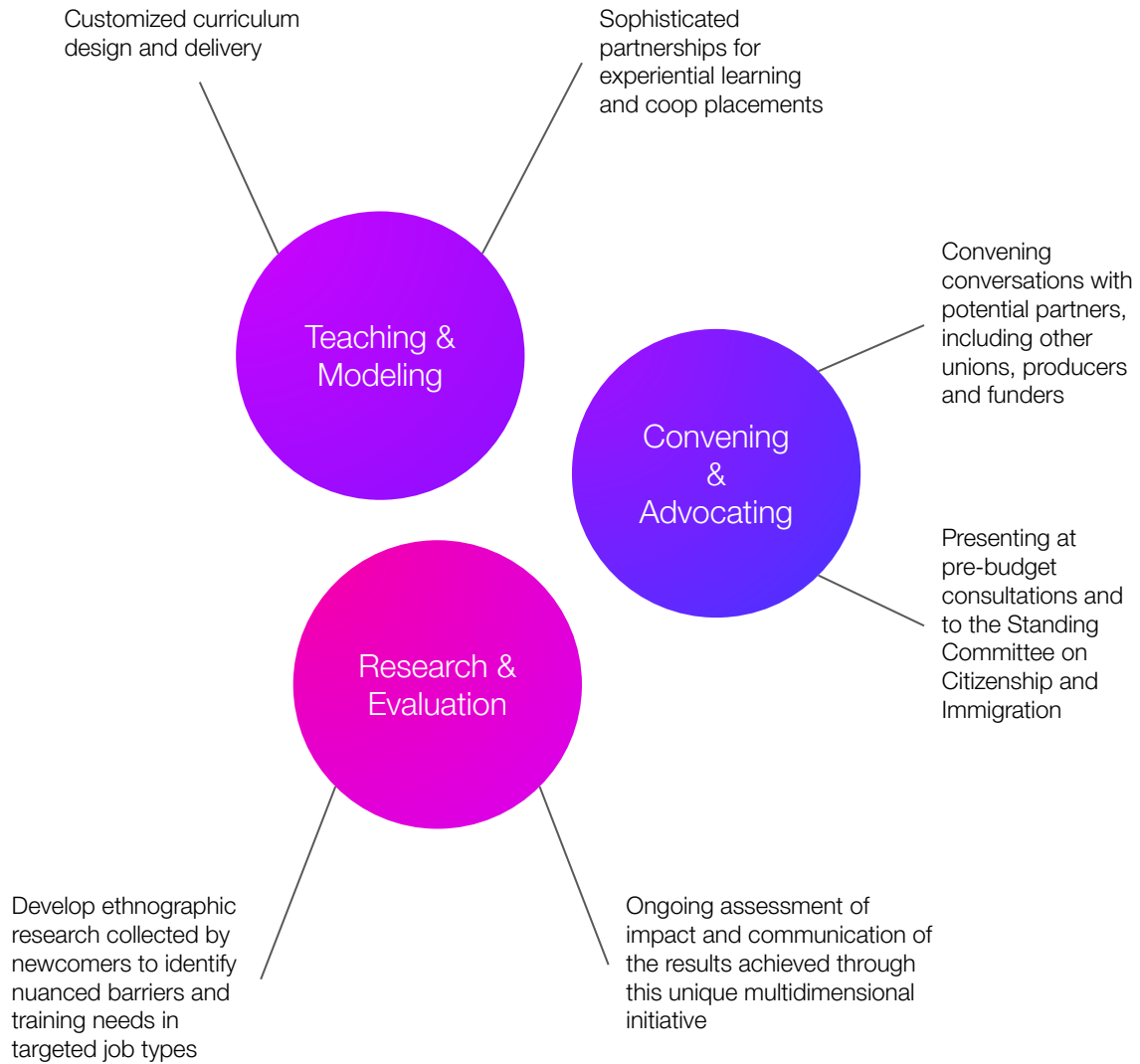
- The screen-based industry, especially unions, are desperate for more workers. The unions wonder why more people don't know about the kinds of opportunities available. They suspect it might be the long hours or that the schools aren't recruiting well enough. The unions do not seem to be in dialogue with immigration channels to contribute to the labour market information that informs immigration quotas.
- The perception from Seneca College is that unions are hard to get into, and that this is why more graduates aren't able to move into these crew positions. Seneca College is interested in offering a microcredential program to help newcomers enter the screen-based industry, and newcomers are well-positioned to help fill important gaps in union membership, as individuals with higher education and management experience. But can Seneca College invest the resources needed to comprehensively approach this work as a prototype for future models of individual career acceleration?
- Graduates, especially international students, long to work in production and stay in Canada. They want to work. But many graduates are international students. They know that unions can't offer the full-time employment credentials needed to qualify for immigration. They cannot accept union work because of the inflexible employment rules of the Canadian immigration system.

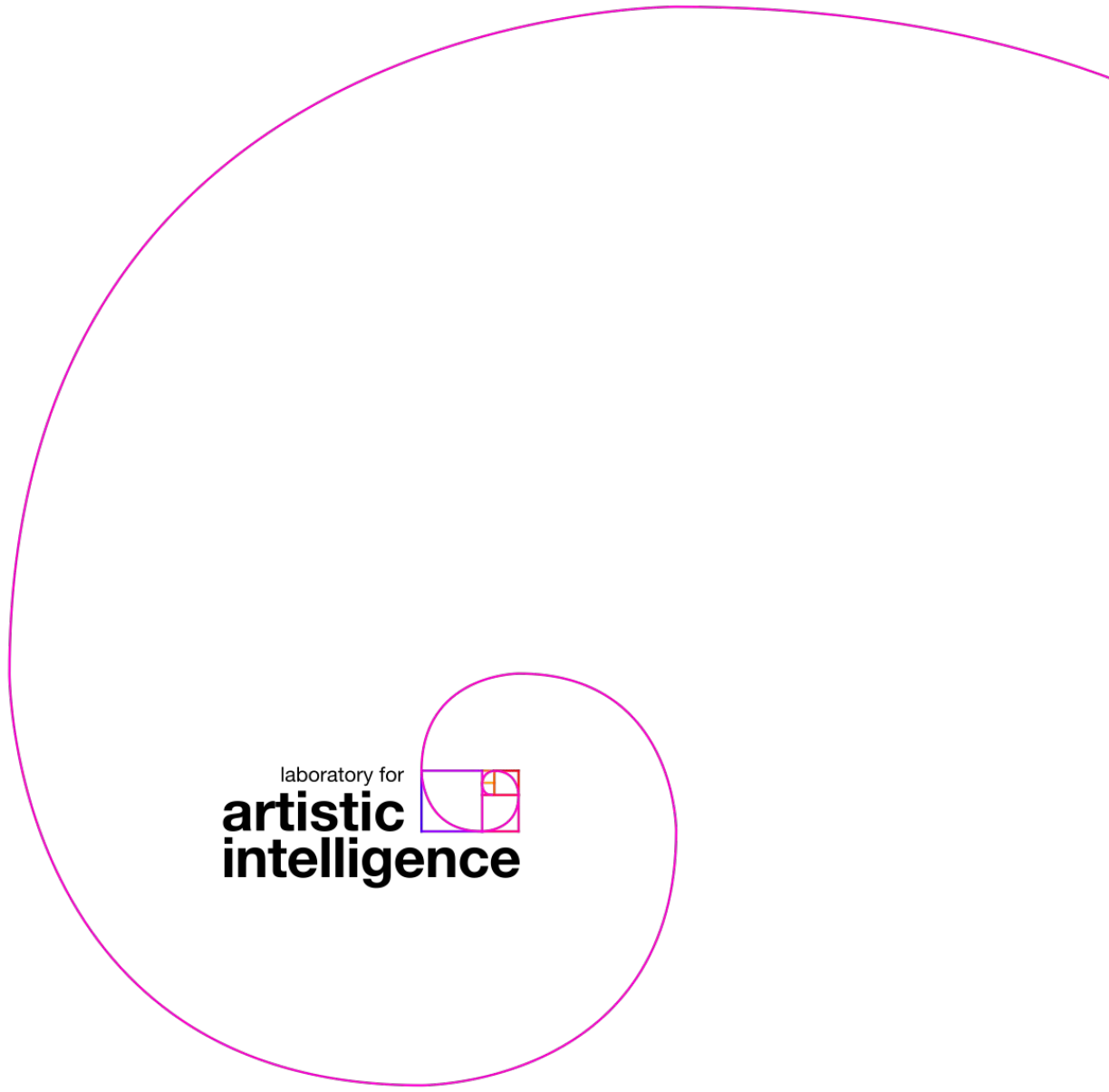
"I've been offered dream jobs with unions. Amazing positions. But it would kind of be a waste of time. I could work for three years doing what I love... But then I would have to leave after three years. It would be a waste."

Postsecondary institutions like Seneca College cannot continue to graduate skilled workers without looking at the rest of the pipeline. The screen-based industry cannot continue to operate under old fears and out-of-date mental models. Almost all growth in the Canadian workforce comes from immigration. It is imperative that meaningful efforts are made to help newcomers accelerate their economic integration into the workforce, and for graduates to get placed in suitable positions and be able to stay in Canada. It will take vision, courage and practice, but the screen-based industry needs to open up and reimagine many aspects of the future means of production *now*.

# Proposed Approach: Research, Teaching & Communicating

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