

International Students for long-term prosperity in Canadian economy:

Expanding pathways to permanence for international students in Canada

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ABSTRACT: On January 1, 2015, Canada launched its Express Entry system in Canada, requiring foreign nationals to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) and wait for an invitation before being allowed to apply for permanent residence. The intentions behind this system were to speed up the processing of immigration applications to avoid a backlog. However, these modifications created several barriers to the permanency of international students because not many international students qualify under the Express Entry system's comprehensive ranking criteria. Recognizing this, politics and policy fail to develop efficient pathways for graduating international students to acquire permanent residency. This policy brief will provide suggestions regarding work experience, increased allowable hours, and other improvements to the current immigration system, to make it accessible for graduating international students to compete in the Express Entry system, increasing their chances for permanent residency.

KEYWORDS: Citizenship, express entry, higher education, immigration, international students, permanent residency

Executive Summary

In many developed nations, like Canada, international student education is a significant and profitable sector. With public support for higher education decreasing, universities are consistently recruiting international students to earn money. Therefore, foreign student numbers have gradually increased across jurisdictions, improving economic conditions. Aside from the tuition fees and human capital they contribute, foreign students offer a diverse pool of qualified educated immigrants that have advanced their knowledge and have conformed to the host country's language and culture. Unfortunately, international students continue to face several issues, including a lack of work-integrated learning opportunities making it difficult to qualify for permanent residency upon completing their degrees. Consequently, international students must now stay for an additional amount of time to accumulate enough local work experience to garner enough points to apply for permanent residency.

This raises the question of whether international students should be given a more accessible opportunity to permanently reside in Canada after graduation. As a result, should Canada keep or change its Express Entry selection method for international students seeking permanent residence?

Implementation of Express Entry System & the Importance of International Students

The Canadian economy and Universities rely on international students. In recent years, immigration reform has introduced the Canadian Express system (CES) to be used by international students when acquiring permanent residency. This immigration reform brings both criticism and appreciation from interested parties. Numerous scholarly researchers have responded to this system by arguing that CES creates systemic barriers within Canada's immigration pathways for international students on their way to becoming Canadian permanent residents and citizens. The current immigration policies have made International graduate students feel unwelcome, unwanted, and undervalued in Canada and argued that it may be better to seek employment and career opportunities elsewhere (Al-Haque 2019, 8). This is a concern for Canada to address because international students as a group are the most desirable source of skilled immigrants for receiving countries. According to Wang (2018, 1060), international students are desirable because they allow governments to remain competitive in an interconnected world. For example, retaining international students is beneficial because they have already partially integrated into the hosting societies, and consequently they can ensure a highly skilled workforce stock. Governments also benefited significantly from international students' expenditures in past years. Therefore, they are also seen as a natural solution for funding and skills shortfalls.

International students contribute to the welfare of the Canadian economy by paying higher tuition fees than domestic students (Lange 2013). In a more specific Canadian context, international students pay 3.4 times more on average for undergraduate programs and 2.3 times more for graduate programs (Hassanein 2014, 1). She and Wotherspoon (2013) argue that with local enrollment declining, it is critical that Canada makes international students feel welcome and provides a pathway to permanent residency. Currently, more than 25,000 international students are studying in Atlantic Canada, helping keep local universities afloat and creating the immigration needed to counter the region's aging population. In addition, these International students contribute \$795 million to the economy of Atlantic Canada and are responsible for 6,731 jobs and \$22 million in taxes (She and Wotherspoon 2013). There are significant economic benefits from international students. The universities provide additional revenue which supports academic research and productivity. Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), reveals it is estimated that in 1996, international students contributed \$2.7 billion to the



Canadian economy or the equivalent of 21,000 jobs (AUCC 2001, 3). In addition, the economic benefits of international students in all education sectors were approximately \$443 million.

Making permanent residency more accessible for international students, will encourage more to apply to Canada. Allowing Canada to not only benefit from international students' annual expenditures, including tuition and living costs, but also from the government revenue generated by filling vacancies in the labour market (Wang 2018, 1062). Furthermore, Canada's economy will not only benefit from international students paying high tuition costs and transferring their abilities, but they are also more likely to enroll in science and technology degrees when compared to Canadian students. Given the numerous benefits of international students, it would be in Canada's best interest to attract and retain them once they graduate. Improving the current Express Entry system for permanent residency will help Canada develop a more prominent profile in the world as an attractive destination.

Contesting the Restrictive Nature of Permanent Residency Under the Express Entry System

International students face systemic barriers when going through Canada's immigration pathways toward permanent residency due to Canadian citizenship and immigration policies which underwent significant changes from 2014 to 2017 (Al-Haque 2019, 5). These changes directly impacted international students in Canada and led some to fear that Canada would become unattractive to international students (Al-Haque 2019, 8). The main change was replacing the Specific Student stream with the Express Entry system by the Canadian federal government at the beginning of 2015 to expedite the processing of visa applications. However, the system has been criticized for the additional steps required to accumulate enough points for international students to become eligible for the Express Entry application. Al-Haque (2019, 8) explains, International graduate students in Canada must apply for permanent residency through the federal government's Express Entry system, which evaluates candidates based on factors such as educational and occupational backgrounds, language abilities, and ability to contribute economically to Canada. Individuals who meet the specific eligibility are asked to apply to become permanent residents of Canada. However, the approach has several systemic impediments regarding work, finances and eligibility barriers, including concerns related to student work experience.

1. Work barriers

When applying for the Express Entry system, participants with Canadian employment experience and/or a job offer from a Canadian employer are given precedence. Al-Haque (2019) argues employment is a limiting factor because International graduate students shared that it was difficult for them to work full-time while completing graduate studies. Students who were teaching or participating as research assistants on campus were ineligible to use that as Canadian work experience within the Express Entry system. Another reason it was difficult to obtain work experience was that many Canadian employers were hesitant to hire foreign employees. Participants Al-Haque (2019, 8) interviewed, shared that to hire a foreigner, Canadian employers had to file a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). The LMIA is in place to guarantee that Canadian citizens and permanent residents are given preference over foreigners when applying for jobs. However, for international students, Canada's labour rules, in conjunction with Canada's immigration restrictions, made obtaining permanent residency exceedingly difficult. Unfortunately, international students continue to face the barrier of "I can't get a job because I don't have status. I don't have status because I can't get a job" (Al-Haque 2019,7).

2. Financial barriers

As mentioned before, international students pay 3.4 times more on average for undergraduate programs and 2.3 times more for graduate programs (Hassanein 2014, 1). Additionally, international students have limited job opportunities because of LMIA regulations and have limited income because they are only permitted to work 20 hours per week. On top of the almost doubled education prices and reduced job hours. To apply for the Express Entry system and to work as a skilled worker, international students must save \$12,000. This money is not easy because students don't make enough money due to restricted hours of work. In addition, international students must pay and take an English test as part of the immigration application. Many students feel that the test is unnecessary because they already have to demonstrate adequate English language proficiency before studying in Canada (Al-Haque 2019, 8).

3. Eligibility barriers

Toughill (2018) argues that Canadian immigration laws have unrealistic expectations and false perceptions. Specifically, the Express Entry system because many students who had been planning their immigration for years lost that opportunity when the Specific Student stream was replaced with the Express Entry system.

It raised the issue that international students did not have enough points to be chosen out of the Express Entry pool of candidates. Therefore, Ottawa amended the point system to make it easier for students to become permanent residents through Express Entry, but students must be careful about qualifying for a post-graduation work permit. Students that take jobs hoping to qualify for Express Entry need to know that their jobs may not qualify. Toughill (2018) gives the example of hundreds of international students being caught by a rule change that stated graduates of private colleges are not eligible for the crucial post-graduation work permit. That change was not clearly stated on the IRCC's website, and even immigration attorneys and consultants occasionally overlooked it when counselling clients (Toughill 2018). Then some students take a job in the hopes of meeting the eligibility requirement of one year of Canadian employment, only to find out too late that working as a bank teller, a restaurant server, or a receptionist will not qualify them for the fast-track immigration program (Toughill 2018). An applicant must have prior experience as a manager, professional, or be in a position that the government considers competent (Toughill 2018). Despite the adjustments made by Ottawa to the Express Entry system, it is far from ideal.

4. Concerns with the express entry points system

According to Al-Haque (2019), international students believed that Canada's Express Entry system sent contradictory messages. On the one hand, the federal government and institutions pursue international students in policy papers to internationalize Canadian higher education. On the other hand, Canada's citizenship and immigration regulations prevent international graduate students from gaining access to the Canadian job market as well as permanent residency. Additionally, the new flexible points-based Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) criteria imposed new conditions for immigration candidates, and only the top-scoring individuals will be asked to apply for permanent residency. Referring to table 1 (see Appendix A for reference to table 1), the statistics reveal desired immigrants in the first four drawings. Analyzing after May 22, 2015, it was required to acquire more than 700 points to get an ITA for permanent residency. To receive such high points, international students would only be successful if they received a job offer with an LMIA or a provincial nomination to become permanent citizens. Obtaining each of these prerequisites would have resulted in 600 points toward their CRS score. This also implies that foreign students with a genuine job offer or a province nomination were likely able to get permanent residence status faster than

those who did not have these items under the Express Entry system. However, as previously stated, international students face work barriers; consequently, it is unlikely for an international student to receive more than 700 points exclusively based on human capital traits. As a result, their chances of getting the additional points necessary are declined. In the most likely event of international students lacking the required points or credentials, these students were judged using the same criteria as temporary employees, to whom the LMIA and provincial nominations were more accessible. Most international students without a job offer or provincial nomination are placed in a disadvantageous position because they cannot have 600 points to get an invitation to apply for permanent residence. As a result, the Express Entry points system creates another barrier for international students.

5. Barriers for international Ph.D. students

Since existing international Ph.D. students no longer qualify for permanent residency after two years of study, the Express Entry system has a detrimental influence on their capacity to qualify for permanent residency. International Ph.D. students can work extra hours while studying in Canada to satisfy the needed number of years of work experience. To be qualified for the Federal Skilled Worker Program, you must have worked full-time for at least one year, or 1,560 hours overall, or 30 hours each week (Wang 2018, 1064). International Ph.D. students may be able to meet this requirement faster by working during school breaks. However, barriers arise when increased permitted work hours may lead to fraud or misuse of the Canadian study permit by international students. International students can get their permanent residency in Canada faster if they have full-time Canadian work experience in highly skilled occupations, but the barrier is created when this is only allowed if they have a valid work permit. Another barrier is that international Ph.D. students have access to many job opportunities on campus working as Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants but student work experience is not eligible under the Express Entry system (Citizenship and Immigration, 2021).

Implications of Canada's Express Entry System

Canada introduced the Express Entry immigration selection system, which is more employer-driven than supply-side-driven, intending to reduce the physical barriers international students face when wishing to obtain permanent residency (Sá and Sabzalieva 2017, 242). Canada wants to recruit foreign students because it is dedicated to a high-skilled economy and

has programs in place to attract the finest international students. As a result, the new policy initiative aims to recruit international students. For example, Canada's citizenship and immigration regulations influence higher education, especially foreign student recruitment and retention (She and Wotherspoon 2013). Therefore, international students are being rewarded back time credit for their time spent studying in Canada and will now be given 30 points under the new Express Entry ranking system (Al-Haque 2019, 8). The Express Entry point system in Canada has also been updated to provide candidates additional points for genuine employment offers. For example, the Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) was updated, allowing international students who finished their studies in Canada to receive 15-30 points (Wang 2018, 1064). CRS reform also awards points to candidates with a valid job offer, which better acknowledges the value of temporary skilled workers in Canada. This reform allows international students to work for employers without an LMIA. Overall, The Express Entry system is faster than the previous immigration system. The processing time for international students who are invited by Canadian Immigration and Citizenship is less than six months. Also, there is no deadline for international students to complete their Express Entry profile, as they can apply for entry to Canada whenever they want. Moreover, there is no risk of having their applications returned to them because the cap has been reached (Wang 2018, 1069).

A Framework for the Extension of the Express Entry System

Theoretically, the Express Entry immigration model allows international students to meet the point requirements for permanent residency. Despite Ottawa's amendments to the Express Entry system, systemic barriers still exist. It is limited because they can acquire points if they gain local work experience; however, international students are unlikely to meet these requirements. Therefore, international students will need to work under a temporary post-graduate work permit to gain enough points before applying for permanent residency. In summary, the Express Entry system in Canada was designed to speed up the processing of immigration applications, but it had the opposite impact. This is because fewer foreign students could meet the CRS criteria and the Express Entry system disadvantaged international students from obtaining permanent residency.

As outlined previously, international students face financial, work, and point system barriers that prevent

them from successfully being eligible for the Express Entry system. International students suffer financial challenges because their tuition prices are nearly double, if not more. In addition, international students have budgetary constraints as a result of limited authorized work hours. These budgetary constraints increase when applying for Express Entry system applications. A proposed solution would be cutting international students' fees by not charging a fee for the English test they take as part of their immigration application. The test is unnecessary because they already had to demonstrate adequate English language proficiency before studying in Canada (Al-Haque 2019, 8). Another barrier includes Canada's citizenship and immigra-



tion regulations that prevent international graduate students from gaining access to the Canadian job market as well as permanent residency. Additionally, the points-based CRS criteria imposed new conditions for immigration candidates. It was required to attain more than 700 points to get an ITA for permanent residency. To receive such high points, international students would only be successful if they received a job offer with an LMIA or a provincial nomination to become permanent citizens. Obtaining each of these prerequisites would have resulted in 600 points toward their CRS score. This also implies that foreign students with a genuine job offer or a provincial nomination were likely able to get permanent resident status faster than those who did not have these items under the Express Entry system.

However, as previously said, international students suffer work barriers; consequently, it is unlikely for an international student to receive more than 700 points exclusively based on human capital traits. As a result, their chances of getting the additional points necessary are reduced. Therefore, a method to make the Express Entry system more accessible for international students would be to account for the informal work experience they have acquired. I suggest this because these students have contributed to and engaged with the Canadian labour force throughout their studies, and those efforts should be counted towards the points system. Another barrier is international students' access to job opportunities because many Canadian employers are hesitant to hire foreign employees. Participants Al-Haque (2019) interviewed, shared that to hire a foreigner, Canadian employers had to file a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). The LMIA is in place to guarantee that Canadian citizens and permanent residents are given preference over foreigners when applying for jobs. This makes it more difficult for international students to obtain work experience. Therefore, a solution would be to provide more work experience opportunities for international students on campus. This could be working as a Teaching Assistant or a Research Assistant. However, a barrier still stands because student work experience is not eligible under the Express Entry system (Citizenship and Immigration, 2021). Therefore, Canada should consider allowing them to use their student work experience towards the work requirement points needed for immigration under the Express Entry system as the work is still valuable. Implementing these suggestions of work experience, increased allowable hours, and other improvements to the current immigration system would make it accessible for graduating international students to compete in the Express Entry system, increasing their chances for

permanent residence. Furthermore, by enhancing the present Express Entry system for permanent residency, Canada will be able to establish a more prominent position in the globe as an appealing place for international students to study, which will benefit the country with human-capital and economic advantages.

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Table 1. The Cut-off Score and Number of Invitations to Apply (ITAs) Issued in Canada's Express Entry Draw (January 2015 - November 19, 2016)

Draw #	Date	Cut-off Score	Number of ITAs Issued	Draw #	Date	Cut-off Score	Number of ITAs Issued
1	01/31/15	886	779	25	01/13/16	453	1518
2	02/07/15	818	779	26	01/27/16	457	1468
3	02/20/15	808	849	27	02/10/16	459	1505
4	02/27/15	735	1187	28	02/24/16	453	1484
5	03/20/15	481	1620	29	03/09/16	473	1013
6	03/27/15	453	1637	30	03/23/16	470	1014
7	04/10/15	469	925	31	04/06/16	470	954
8	04/17/15	453	715	32	04/20/16	468	1018
9	05/22/15	755	1361	33	05/06/16	534	799
10	06/12/15	482	1501	34	05/18/16	484	763
11	06/26/15	469	1575	35	06/01/16	483	762
12	07/10/15	463	1516	36	06/15/16	488	752
13	07/17/15	451	1581	37	06/29/16	482	773
14	08/07/15	471	1402	38	07/13/16	482	747
15	08/21/15	456	1523	39	07/27/16	488	755
16	09/08/15	459	1517	40	08/10/16	490	754
17	09/18/15	450	1545	41	08/24/16	538	750
18	10/02/15	450	1530	42	09/07/16	491	1000
19	10/23/15	489	1502	43	09/21/16	483	1288
20	11/13/15	484	1506	44	10/12/16	484	1518
21	11/27/15	472	1559	45	10/19/16	475	1804
22	12/04/15	461	1451	46	11/02/16	472	2080
23	12/18/15	460	1503	47	11/16/16	470	2427
24	01/06/16	461	1463				

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