

IRCC dialogue session on the future of Canada's immigration system

April 2023

Executive Summary

The need for a review of Canada's immigration system is an ongoing discussion that arises periodically. While Canada's immigration system has been successful in many respects, there are always areas for improvement and adaptation to changing circumstances.

In this context, World Education Services (WES) appreciates IRCC's current efforts in reviewing Canada's immigration system through a broad-based engagement initiative with various stakeholders to capture a diversity of perspectives. We share the **IRCC's goal** of creating "immigration policies and programs that are modern, responsive to change, and aligned with Canada's social, economic and cultural needs".

To ensure a comprehensive and inclusive review of the immigration system, all aspects related to attraction and retention of immigrants must be taken into consideration. The review process should also be guided by the principles of transparency, accountability, predictability, and equity.

Focusing on three main topics – the future vision for Canada's immigration system, building on existing strengths, and fundamental principles of immigration policy, this policy brief outlines the following recommendations:

- Develop a national strategy to consolidate efforts to leverage the talents of immigrants and overcome the barriers to their full contribution.
- Create immigrant-inclusive economy and labour market.
- Expand pathways to permanent residency for temporary work permit holders and make them eligible for settlement services.
- Provide accurate information to international students before arrival.
- Support labour market integration processes of international students and graduates.
- Streamline permanent residence pathways for international graduates with comprehensive eligibility criteria.
- Expand the scope of settlement services to include temporary work permit holders, international students and graduates.

What should the immigration system of Canada's future look like?

A global leader in welcoming immigrants, Canada's managed immigration is often touted as a model for other countries. With an aging labour force, declining birth rate, and job vacancies hovering around one million, our need for immigration grows more acute every day.

There has been significant progress over the past decades, including the introduction of the Express Entry, Fair Access to regulated professions legislation in several provinces, bridging programs, and the recent digitization process to enhance immigration application processes, to name a few.

Structural changes to the global economy, and the changing nature of work are influencing Canadians' views of immigration and we need to ensure that 25-50 years from now we do not find ourselves discussing similar issues.

In this context, we need to have an immigration system that is built on the principles of transparency, predictability, and equity, that is grounded in ongoing and structured collaboration between the many stakeholders in the ecosystem, to ensure successful attraction and retention of immigrants. The system must also be proactive in addressing humanitarian needs in an increasingly volatile global context.

How do we build on existing strengths?

Canada has been successful in attracting especially young, educated, experienced individuals who can meet Canada's labour shortages and contribute socially and economically to many Canadian communities. There is no shortage of talented people who want to move Canada. Even after the pandemic, a [study conducted by WES](#) showed that the numbers who want to immigrate to Canada have not changed significantly.

Canada offers robust settlement services and programming for many newcomers. There are various bridging programs available for several sectors, intended to provide training and labour market orientation and integration. Canada continues to invest in programming related to its official policies of multiculturalism and bilingualism.

There are also localized programs to meet regional needs, like the provincial nominee programs and the Atlantic Immigration Program.

Despite these efforts, key significant challenges persist, including underutilization of immigrant talent. These challenges are complex. The COVID 19 pandemic and the rising cost of living have further

exacerbated this complexity. Immigration backlog remains close to **one million applications**. Immigrants, work permit holders, and international students have been unequally impacted by the pandemic and the rising cost of living.

Underutilization of Immigrant Talent

Canada's goal of welcoming 1.4 million immigrants by 2025, and increasingly globally competitive environment for newcomer talent, makes it even more important to ensure that applications are processed at least within the standard processing times. Newcomers must also be able to fully contribute their skills and experience to the labour market through meaningful, commensurate employment.

There are many skilled immigrants who are working far below potential, in jobs below their skill levels, or even completely out of their field of expertise. For example, despite the health care workforce crisis, **nearly half of the internationally educated health care professionals (IEHP)** are unemployed or employed in positions that do not make full use of their skills, education, and experience.

There are many reasons for underutilization of immigrant talent, including navigation difficulties with labour market information; lack of professional connections; poor recognition of international education and experience; overt and covert xenophobia and racism; costly, lengthy, and disjointed licensure and registration processes in a number of fields.

These factors are all in the healthcare sector. Additionally, **2022 WES research** on the underutilization of IEHPs identified profound gaps in the data available on IEHP employment. For example, despite numerous data sources capturing specific aspects of the IEHP landscape, it is nearly impossible to determine basic facts such as just how many IEHPs are in the country, how many are practicing in their intended professions, or how many are attempting to re-enter their professions.

Recommendations

- 1. Develop a national strategy to consolidate efforts to leverage the talents of immigrants and overcome the barriers to their full contribution.**

Canada needs a national strategy to consolidate efforts to leverage the talents of immigrants and overcome the barriers to their full contribution. Such a strategy requires ongoing, transparent dialogue among representatives from all levels of government, business and employer associations,

training and regulatory bodies, unions, post-secondary institutions (PSIs), and the not-for-profit sector.

Strategy should include components, such as:

- collecting comparable standardized data on immigrants seeking registration in regulated professions and streamlining licensing processes for those already in the country,
- establishing a national licensing framework that is harmonized with provincial/territorial regulatory bodies, including legislated timelines that result in expeditious reviews of applicant files, and
- convening relevant stakeholders to develop and implement a cohesive pan-Canadian health care workforce strategy that addresses the immigration, licensure, and workforce inclusion obstacles facing immigrant health professionals. Health Canada's work on the IEHP Blueprint stands as a sound model, awaiting implementation.

2. Create immigrant-inclusive economy and labour market.

We need systems, tools, and processes in place so that prospective immigrants can have their education and skills assessed while they are still in their home country. Immigrants in the pre-arrival stage must get the information and resources they need to understand the Canadian labour market.

We also need to move beyond academic credentials. We need to use competency-informed assessment tools that will result in a more diverse and inclusive labour force. Building an immigrant-inclusive economy demands innovative approaches to recruitment and hiring. Additionally, it requires taking tangible steps to confront racism (for example, requesting Canadian experience, or inequities in visa processing times linked to racialized regions) which impacts integration into the labour market and local communities.

We need to continue to expand the reach of settlement services by increasing investments in more programs and allocating adequate funding for settlement services.

Pathways to Permanent Residency for Those with Temporary Status

Temporary Work Permit Holders

Canada increasingly relies on temporary work permit holder workers to address the labour shortages, who have become an integral part the labour force.

For example, the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) was created to fill **temporary gaps** in the Canadian labour market however, it has grown and evolved into a state of permanence. Tens of

thousands of SAWP workers return to the same communities in Canada year after year. De facto, they have become **permanently temporary**.

The broader Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) umbrella that the SAWP sits under perpetuates **exploitative and discriminatory** work conditions.

In addition, although the cumulative-duration rule (also known as the “four-in, four-out” rule limiting how long temporary work permit holders could stay in Canada) was overturned in 2016, for the five years it was in place, it contributed to large number of temporary work permit holders slipping into an undocumented status. Canada’s immigration system must finally resolve the plight of what is believed to be as many as 500,000 persons who have precarious or undocumented immigration status.

Furthermore, in the current system, workers in so-called “low-skilled” jobs, many of whom are disproportionately racialized, have a slim chance of receiving an invitation to permanent residency, because of either the design of the work permit program or their occupation, education level, and language skills do not meet the eligibility criteria of existing immigration programs.

However, as the pandemic has shown, these workers are essential to the economy and fulfill long-term needs in sectors with ongoing demand.

Recommendations

- 1. Expand pathways to permanent residency for temporary work permit holders and make them eligible for settlement services.**

The design of immigration policy should leverage human resources for long-term prosperity by expanding pathways to permanent residency for migrant workers in all the training, education, experience, and responsibilities (TEER) categories. A **recent policy paper** by Rupa Banerjee and Daniel Hiebert, note that such an expansion will support the instrumental objective of reducing job vacancies given that *“many of these individuals are employed in jobs with sustained demand, and permanent jobs should be filled by permanent residents”*.

The creation of a pathway for migrant workers must also ensure that potential candidates have equitable access to application opportunities. This has not always been the case. For example, the piloted Temporary Resident to Permanent Resident (TR to PR) Pathway had a complex, time-consuming application process, like other immigration pathways. Those without the technical skills,

education, and ability to navigate the application portal were left with few options. Settlement organizations could not help them either, because temporary status makes these workers ineligible for federally funded settlement assistance.

The TR to PR pathway should be reinstated and expanded. It must be simple to navigate, expeditious and applicants must be supported. IRCC should revise the eligibility requirements of the settlement services and the immigration programs.

In addition, new PR pathways are needed that target newcomers with backgrounds in agriculture coupled with the supports (for example, access to loans and industry information) that enable individuals to enter the agricultural and food processing sector as small-scale owner operators. Such models exist for entrepreneurs with financial capital, and which could serve as a model for those with relevant human capital.

International Students and Graduates

Canada is one of the top destinations for international students. The international student population in Canada has tripled in the last ten years and they also contribute to the broader economy as consumers, contributing \$22 billion to GDP annually, and supporting more than **170,000 jobs**.

Many prospective international students perceive study permits as an easier path to permanent residency. Therefore, it is important to consider the entire journey of international students—from pre-arrival, to studying in Canada, and transition into the workforce either in Canada or in their home countries.

Looking more holistically at their experience will help us understand the challenges that they face, as they go through their journey and key recommendations to address these gaps. It is important to note that this will require increased collaboration among the many stakeholders.

Recommendations

1. Provide accurate information to international students before arrival.

Prospective international students seeking to study in Canada often get advice and assistance from recruitment agents. A November 2021 report from ICEF Monitor (a global organization that supports global student mobility through networking) estimates that almost **50 percent** of international students studying in Canada are referred by an agent.

Inaccurate or missing information from recruitment agents presents so many challenges and unfortunately international students often rely heavily on these agents to make life-changing decisions.

We have a model in Canada that can address this issue. In 2016, Manitoba introduced **legislation to regulate the educational service provider industry** and protect international students from recruitment agents in Canada and abroad that may lead them astray.

IRCC should establish a task force to investigate the relationship between PSIs and international student recruiters and encourage provinces to introduce similar legislation like Manitoba to regulate recruitment agents. This will enable prospective international students to access accurate information and reduce fraudulent activities.

2. Expand the scope of settlement services to include international students and graduates.

International students and graduates must be set-up for success if they make the decision to stay in Canada as potential immigrants. Canada needs to support them in the same way as we do with other prospective immigrants. These students need to have access to the same supports—and in some cases additional unique supports—to facilitate their labour market transition. This means 1) ensuring equitable access to IRCC funded settlement and employment services, 2) working with PSIs and provincial, territorial and municipal governments to ensure international students have access to wrap-around supports, including financial and health services, and 3) allocating targeted funding to PSIs obligating them to ensure equitable tuition structures are in place for international students.

3. Support labour market integration processes of international students and graduates.

Supporting international students in their transition to the Canadian labour market requires expanding access to, and funding for, work-integrated learning programs and summer job opportunities.

According to Statistics Canada, the importance of Canadian work experience is well-recognized and contributes to a clear earnings advantage for international students with Canadian education and employment experience.

IRCC must provide international students the opportunity to gain Canadian work experience through different work integrated programs. This requires, amongst other things, removing the maximum cap on working hours permanently.

4. Streamline permanent residence pathways for international graduates with comprehensive eligibility criteria.

To better leverage international students as a driver of economic growth and recovery, the government should adopt a holistic policy approach that focuses not only on the recruitment of international students, but also on their retention. This approach would require ensuring greater policy coherence and transparency and amending the Express Entry system to include streamlined immigration pathways for international students.

To qualify for a study permit, international students must provide evidence that they will enter Canada temporarily and leave after completing their studies. Some prospective students, however, are rejected for study permits because they cannot prove their intention to leave. This creates policy incoherence. On the one hand, applicants are assessed based on their intention to come to Canada to study only. On the other hand, the government encourages international students to apply for permanent residency after completing their schooling. (Nova Scotia's **Study and Stay** program is one example of a government initiative focused on encouraging international students to remain in the province as permanent residents.)

IRCC should provide transparent and consistent information to international students. Policy coherence and alignment between study permit criteria and immigration pathways criteria is important.

To support the transition of international students to permanent residency, there must be a clear, streamlined, and stable immigration program for them under the Express Entry system. The TR to PR Pathway pilot shows a clear path forward: Specifically, those international graduates who are employed in any occupation listed on the National Occupation Classification (NOC) website must be eligible to apply for permanent residency. This proposed change will support the creation of a more equitable program, as eligibility is not tied to a particular length of employment or a certain TEER category. Additionally, work experience gained in Canada while studying can be counted towards the minimum requirements of the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) program.

What underlying principles, objectives and features are important to consider?

In line with **IRCC's vision**, which focuses on building a nation that is economically, socially, and culturally prosperous, the current review of the immigration system must adopt a holistic approach that considers both the recruitment of talent, unification of families, humanitarian responsibilities,

and the pathways for integration once individuals arrive in Canada. This approach must be guided by the principles of transparency, accountability, predictability, and equity.

Transparency and Accountability

The principles of transparency and accountability are critical components of policymaking and implementation. Appropriate attention to these principles generates higher levels of trust and confidence in Canada's immigration system, which is crucial for maintaining Canada's competitive edge on immigration. These principles are also vital for creating a sustainable immigration policy that can adapt to changing needs and circumstances.

As more countries around the world compete for talented immigrants, Canada must demonstrate that its immigration system is efficient and effective. This requires, for example, creating consultation processes that are transparent, ongoing, and balanced in terms of stakeholder interest. Additionally, assessing and prioritizing the inputs received from consultation processes requires a clear framework that outlines the criteria and factors used to evaluate the inputs.

Predictability

To maintain Canada's competitive edge on immigration, we must ensure that prospective immigrants have access to information that is realistic, accurate, and timely regarding all the factors associated with their immigration journey as well as success in employment, job satisfaction, and prospects for commensurate employment. This information is crucial for immigrants to make informed decisions about where to settle and what types of jobs to pursue.

Rapid processing times are also crucial for enhancing predictability. The pandemic has led to increased processing times for many applicants, including long waits for application updates. It is essential to ensure that applications are processed within the standard processing times or less. Managing thousands of online applications accurately and efficiently requires maintaining an IT system that is minimally compromised by technical glitches and systems errors. A robust IT system will benefit both applicants and Canada's immigration system.

Equity

The current review provides an important opportunity for IRCC to create a more equitable and fair immigration system. To achieve this goal, IRCC should prioritize the recognition of international education and qualifications. This will ensure that immigrants with internationally recognized qualifications are not unfairly excluded from the Canadian labour market.



Additionally, IRCC should eliminate systemic barriers from its immigration policies that prevent certain groups from accessing immigration benefits. This includes 1) revising eligibility requirements of economic immigration programs to overcome the gender and race skew inherent to the ‘high-skill and low-skill’ dichotomy, and to provide equitable access to candidates from all TEER categories, 2) ensuring that international graduates who are employed in any occupation that exists in the NOC website are eligible to apply for permanent residency, regardless of the length of their employment, and 3) determining language requirements as per an applicant’s TEER category.

As part of the government’s commitment to address the situation for the thousands who are either undocumented or have precarious immigration status, IRCC must develop a comprehensive regularization program. This will help ensure that individuals who have been living in Canada without legal status are able to regularize their status and fully participate in Canadian society.

About WES

World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit social enterprise that supports the educational, economic, and social inclusion of immigrants, refugees, and international students. For nearly 50 years, WES has set the standard for international academic credential evaluation, supporting millions of people as they seek to achieve their academic and professional goals. Through decades of experience as a leader in global education, WES has developed a wide range of tools to pursue social impact at scale. From evaluating academic credentials to shaping policy, designing programs, and providing philanthropic funding, we partner with a diverse set of organizations, leaders, and networks to uplift individuals and drive systems change. Together with its partners, WES enables people to learn, work, and thrive in new places.