Express Entry and International Students

How Are International Students Faring in the Express Entry System?

Canada, like numerous countries around the world, is a destination country for immigrants and international students. It has previously been estimated that with the current rate of growth, international students will account for 17.3% of total post-secondary enrolment in Canada by 2020. It is evident that the federal government has realized the significant potential that international students represent both economically and culturally.

This paper will explore international student pathways to permanent residency (PR) through the economic immigration system known as Express Entry. Express Entry is a two stage economic immigration system, launched in January 2015, for specific types of economic immigration programs which include the Federal Skilled Worker Program, Federal Skilled Trades Program, Canadian Experience Class and a portion of the Provincial Nominee Program. Candidates may apply through a category that fits them best. Stage one ensures that candidates complete an online Express Entry profile; this provides information about their skills, work experience, language ability, education and other details that will be assessed. Stage two enables the highest-ranking candidates in the pool to apply for permanent residence, using a points-based system.

Currently, the federal government is focused on attracting international students via the Express Entry system and other means of immigration to Canada. In terms of economic immigration policy and the role of international students, there appears to be a pendulum shift back towards opening the doors; Ottawa intends to create more accessible and easier systems of immigration in particular by adapting Express Entry.

Since launching, there have been over 31,000 Invitations to Apply (ITA) to permanent residence issued to a wide array of highly skilled immigrants, and nearly 10,000 individuals (principal applicants and their family) have already arrived in Canada as permanent residents through Express Entry. Research findings indicate that many international students fare well in Express Entry.

Responding to a lack of information on the subject matter of Express Entry with regards to international students, this paper will delve further into how and why this is the case, whilst also highlighting changes to immigration policy and mechanisms that could affect international students.

Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight how this impacts the province of Alberta and the settlement and integration sector. Alberta is the leading province in terms of number of applicants of Express Entry by Province of Destination. This will influence community connections, services, infrastructure and most crucially, jobs. The settlement and integration sector will have to respond to the increasing number of international students settling in Alberta and wider Canada by adjusting services and increasing the capacity to serve those needing assistance.
Policy Priorities

Within Prime Minister Trudeau’s Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Mandate Letter to the Honourable John McCallum, the overall direction that Ottawa intends to take with immigration and Express Entry is apparent. An emphasis on a government that will bring ‘real change’ to Canadian’s and those seeking residency and citizenship is consistent throughout.

In the mandate letter to Honourable Minister McCallum, the Prime Minister expressed that the overarching goal will be to reopen the doors to Canada and welcome those wanting to contribute to Canada’s success. Canada is an open, accepting country; qualities that the Prime Minister highlighted should be reflected in immigration policies. Emphasis has also been put on strengthening communities by welcoming newcomers who want to build a better Canada and to help those seeking refuge from conflict and war.

“Canada’s success in immigration largely stems from our open minds and hearts towards immigrants, who end up reciprocating by making immense contributions to the country, Canada could export this approach to the rest of the world” - Justin Trudeau

Investing in a growing economy, strengthening the middle class, and helping those working hard to join Canadian society is emphasized throughout. Indeed this can be linked to the recent influx of immigrants and refugees, whereby ongoing government-wide efforts plan to resettle 25,000 refugees from Syria as part of the Annual Immigration Levels Plan for 2016. International students also hold a substantial influence on immigration plans. They are very beneficial for the economy, bringing in huge amounts in government revenue and creating thousands of jobs in the process.

There is a growing sense of inclusiveness and integration of other nationals into a multicultural Canadian society; this can be seen across every realm of immigration in Canada. International students are very highly sought after and are set to become a top priority for the Express Entry program.

Express Entry: A Changing System

Express Entry was initially launched to meet Canada’s labour needs by securing permanent residency for highly-skilled foreigners in six months or less. Honourable Minister McCallum has previously announced that Ottawa will review Express Entry with hopes that it will make it easier for international students to become permanent residents after they have graduated from a Canadian post-secondary institution. McCallum stated that “the challenge is to improve Express Entry to make it more flexible, more fluid, more accessible, and more desirable for those businesses wanting to bring immigrants to this country.”

In regards to changes that are set to affect international students, part of the mandate intends to eliminate regulations that remove the credit given to international students for half of the time that they spend in Canada. Thus meaning, that instead of international students only receiving partial credit for half the time they have spent in Canada, the intention is to give credit for the full time that they have spent studying in Canada, which will once more, improve chances for Permanent Residency. Further still, regulations that require new citizens to sign a declaration that they intend to reside in Canada are set to be removed, alongside action to repeal provisions in the Citizenship Act that give the government the right to strip citizenship from dual nationals. This is a positive and progressive step forwards for international students intending to permanently move to Canada following graduation. These motions would put international students in a promising position for the Express Entry program in contrast to previous years where international students were not a priority and hindered on the basis of points. Essentially this sidesteps difficulties when
in competition with others in the pool and has significant implications for the retention of international students.

The federal government is looking to give more points to students under the Express Entry program via staged changes, which as it stands, prioritizes immigrants who are skilled workers. Recently, McCallum expressed his opinion on the matter stating that “I think the best source of immigrants for Canada is international students...because they know French and English, because they know Canada, because they’re educated, because they’re young. We should court them. We should encourage them to come here.” vi The two stages are outlined:

1. Stage one: would be to give more points to students, a priority.
2. Stage two: further improve Express Entry, following additional study and analysis.

These staged changes would ensure that more international students are coming to Canada and attaining PR status. This would bring notable benefits economically, making international students very important to the labour market as future taxpayers and service users. International students are also highly skilled and bring these skills when settling and integrating. For example, the top job occupations for international students are within engineering, medicine, nursing and law. Phase one will have the fastest initial impact on the Canadian labour market.

Ottawa is also considering limiting or eliminating the use of Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA) under Express Entry. vii The assessments are documents employers can apply for to show there is no Canadian who can do a specific job. By limiting or eliminating LMIA’s, this would substantially reduce barriers for non-Canadian candidates coming to Canada.

Stephane Duval, Canadian Bar Association national immigration sector chair, expressed his optimism regarding the reforming of Express Entry for international students, who as he argues, have lost a clear path to residency. There are expectations of what is outlined by the federal government in regards to Express Entry and international students: the implications will later be explored.

With more international students looking to permanently settle in Canada, this will require the settlement and integration sector to provide support and empowerment as they do with other immigrant and refugee populations.

**International Students: Economics and Retention**

There are approximately 356,600 international students currently in Canada; this is a number which has doubled over the past decade with an 83% increase in international student population in Canada from 2008-2014. viii At the end of 2015, surveys indicated that 51% of international students in Canada have the intention to apply for permanent residency following completion of their studies. viii In the past is has been difficult for international students to attain PR. In 2015 the average Express Entry score for international students was 408 points: which was short of the 450 points needed to apply. With Express Entry set to change, increasing the chances of PR for over 125,000 international students who intend to apply creates an enormous impact in terms of retention.

Research also conveys that international students who attain PR, on the whole fare well in the economy. ix Factors of age and education are the key indicators when predicting immigrant earnings over a long period: the more educated and younger an immigrant is, the more they are likely to earn. ix From an economic perspective, it may be advantageous for Canada to retain this population due to having an aging population and also as a response to labour market demands. International students bring nearly $8B to Canada annually from tuition and living expenses, this

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1 The assessments are documents employers can apply for to show there is no Canadian who can do a specific job.
presence also created over 81,000 jobs and produced more than $445M in government revenue in 2014 alone. This can consequently be viewed as a mutually beneficial relationship. The retention of international students in the job market will most likely increase if this continues.

Ultimately, if changes are to be made which give international students additional Express Entry points upon graduation, this should most likely help more international students attain PR. This once again creates a large impact on the settlement and integration sector. International students may therefore require assistance and support from settlement and integration services when transitioning to their new lives in Alberta and wider Canada. These services could include support with interpretation, translation and language training, support with job searching, professional training, and general information regarding community services, schools and healthcare, alongside others.

**Express Entry Draw History: Previous Rounds of Invitations**

Firstly, since the introduction of Express Entry, the number of invitations to apply has continued to fluctuate, however, the minimum number of Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) points required to apply has steadily reduced on average. This essentially makes it more accessible for those applying for permanent residency through Express Entry. This is very much in line with the mandate of the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

The most recent draw on August 10th saw approximately 754 candidates receive their Invitation to Apply (ITA). The statistics portray that in 2016, candidates roughly need between 450-470 CRS points. The last few draws have generally seen a decline in the number of ITA’s being offered. However, the latest Express Entry draws in 2016 have witnessed a sharp decrease in the number of CRS points needed by Express Entry candidates before they can apply for PR, compared to initial required CRS points, which was over 800 at the inauguration of Express Entry.

This decrease in CRS point requirement is welcome news for those seeking to attain PR. A score near the 480 mark does still however require candidates to be awarded a high number of points for human capital and skills transferability factors, or for a provincial nomination certificate, otherwise a qualifying job offer also counts. It is necessary to highlight that candidates who obtain a nomination certificate or job offer are awarded 600 CRS points and also receive an ITA for Canadian permanent residence at a subsequent draw from the pool.

International students therefore fare very well when regarding recent CRS cut-off points; this is due to the factors of Express Entry that many international students meet. These factors provide points for candidates, with education and age being highly emphasised. It is therefore necessary to highlight the advantages that this gives international students, and also why international students are faring so well. The following sections will elaborate on this by examining statistical data and highlighting what exactly these factors are. Essentially this will portray that many international students are likely to score highly across many factors.

- Lowest CRS points in any Express Entry draw: 450
- Highest CRS points in any Express Entry draw: 886
- Lowest CRS points in a 2016 Express Entry draw: 453
- Highest CRS points in a 2016 Express Entry draw: 53

There has been a fluctuation of all figures since the introduction of Express Entry, however, now it appears to be reaching a point of consistency for CRS points required. International students do indeed fare well when analysing these statistics, this is due to the factors of Express Entry: this will now be explored.
Factors of Express Entry

There are numerous factors alongside transferable skills that account for the amount of CRS points given to those applying through Express Entry. These are used to determine if a candidate will be able to settle and integrate easily in Canada. These are the factors known to contribute to economic success. Skills transferability, which include education and work experience, when combined, result in greater chances of being employed, and higher income. Meeting these factors and skills would make a candidate successful in Canada. The key factors that impact the Express Entry ranking system are as follows:

1. Age
2. Level of Education
3. Official Languages Proficiency
4. Canadian Work Experience

<table>
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<th>Factors</th>
<th>Points per factor-with a spouse or common-law partner</th>
<th>Points per factor-without a spouse or common-law partner</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>110 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
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<td>150 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Official Languages Proficiency</td>
<td>150 points</td>
<td>160 points</td>
</tr>
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<td>Canadian Work Experience</td>
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<td>80 points</td>
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It is essential to highlight that level of education is a central factor for applicants of Express Entry, and once again, this impacts international students substantially. Generally speaking, Express Entry is a favourable system to international students and post-graduate work permit holders as they are awarded a substantial benefit by the Express Entry ranking system for their high education, strong official language skills, Canadian work experience, and quite regularly, their youth. Those that are between the ages of 20-29 score the maximum amount of CRS points, the majority of international students would be within this age category. xiii

If a candidate meets the criteria for each factor, they are awarded more points. Combining all these factors together would equal a maximum cumulative score of 500 CRS points, which in line with the average statistics for the minimum number of CRS points required in 2016, would meet, and surpass the average cut-off point. Statistical data portrays that Express Entry active candidates who are in the pool that have ever been in possession of a study permit in Canada, have a higher median CRS score than in comparison to others in the pool. xiv

A large proportion of candidates who have held a Canadian study permit have a CRS score of between 376 and 475. In contrast to those who have never had a Canadian study permit, those individuals in the pool are generally agglomerated at a CRS score of 300 to 400. Once more, this conveys that international students, on average are faring extremely well in the Express Entry program.

During 2015, proportionally more candidates of Express Entry who received an ITA (22%) had experience studying in Canada in comparison to those in the pool (13%). xv Once more, this reiterates that candidates that have studied at Canadian institutions are very likely to fare well
within Express Entry. Combining all these factors and most importantly education for international students, provides a strong position in the pool.

If changes are made which would provide bonus points to candidates with Canadian educational credentials, in addition to the base points for their level of education in general, this would significantly increase the number of candidates receiving an ITA who have Canadian educational credentials. This would also sidestep difficulties relating to recognition of foreign credentials; the implications of this would be enormous.

**ITA Category**

The below table shows the number of Express Entry candidates that received their ITA who have ever been in possession of a study permit by ITA category (as of November 23, 2015). The Express Entry status categories are Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSW), Canadian Experience Class (CEC), and Federal Skilled Trades Program (FST).

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<th>No #</th>
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<tr>
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<td>39</td>
<td>1,827</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>FSW</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>7,355</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEC</td>
<td>1,243</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7,996</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>9,239</td>
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<tr>
<td>FST</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2,161</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>2,231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>5,301</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18,908</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>24,209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout 2015, proportionally more Express Entry candidates who received an ITA (22%) had experience studying in Canada, compared to those in the pool (13%). The Provincial Nominee Program, Federal Skilled Worker Program and Canadian Experience Class are the most successful categories for those receiving an ITA who have been in possession of a study permit.

The majority of full-time international students who graduate from their programs in Canada are therefore eligible for open work permits through the Post-Graduate Work Permit Programs. Candidates can gain experience in the Canadian labour market which is awarded CRS ranking system points in Express Entry, this may ultimately help them transition to permanent residency. Once again, relating back to the factors of Express Entry, this further increases the chances of international students receiving an ITA. It is important now to interpret and analyse the above in regards to Alberta as a province.

**Alberta: A Leader in Express Entry**

Express Entry candidates who applied for permanent residency to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) chose Alberta, Ontario or British Columbia as their Province of Destination. These statistics align with destination provinces prior to Express Entry and have been explained by a combination of community connections, services, infrastructure and most importantly, jobs.

Alberta received approximately 7,996 applications across all programs falling under Express Entry in 2015, within a cumulative total amount of 21,562 applications across all provinces. Alberta leads in total number of applications with Ontario following closely with 7,348 and British Columbia with
4,384. These statistics convey that Alberta is the top destination for those coming to Canada via Express Entry.

Research further shows that within the province of Alberta, international students are nearing the 20,000 mark, accounting for nearly 6% of all international students in Canada.** With an 83% increase in international student population in Canada within just six years, and with 51% planning to apply for PR in Canada, this once again indicates a further increase in future years to come.

There are no specific recordings of statistics for international students within the Express Entry program per province; however, data gives a relatively good indication of which Province of Destination candidates are heading to. With Express Entry set to continue to change in the upcoming months, it will be very interesting to see how these changes impact different provinces and also to see statistical recordings for international students attaining PR in different provinces across Canada.

This will have a substantial impact on the settlement and integration sector as previously highlighted. Settlement and integration services offered by providers that work with newcomers in Alberta may see an increased demand for their services, unless candidates were already eligible for such services.

![Chart 1: Applications of Express Entry Received in 2015 by Province of Destination](chart1)

**Settlement and Integration: Needs and Retention**

It is evident that international students are highly educated, speak an official language and may possibly be able to fill labour market shortages. They also have strong social connections due to years of studying in Canada, and ultimately now are set to become a top priority within Express Entry. It is important to examine how this will affect the settlement and integration sector in the future and the needs of international students. It should be noted that international students are not eligible for settlement services until they become permanent residents. A majority of international students are unable to become permanent residents until they have gained at least one year of skilled work experience upon completion of their studies.

Research has often revealed that international students struggle to receive adequate settlement and integration services, such as, language training. Financial constraints often hinder services accessed by international students who need them. This can also be linked to challenges establishing social networks.
A spokesperson from International Student Services at the University of Calgary expressed that in regards to settlement and integration, the primary needs of international students include supporting family members during their period of study. Spouses of students also need assistance with labour market integration, resume building and job search skills. Children of students needing access to childcare is a primary need, as is better access to community resources such as events and socialising within Canadian culture. Further needs include financial aid, budgeting, and support finding affordable housing in an area with easy access to transit.

The main issue raised is that international students do not receive support from settlement and integration services until they have already been living in the community for many years. In order to address these concerns, it has been suggested that settlement and integration organizations support temporary residents and international students who have PR applications underway, or are wanting to submit a PR application. xvii

Acquiring and earmarking more government settlement funding specifically for highly skilled international students could be a potential solution to address these challenges. Students in medicine for example, could offer remarkable long-term benefits to Canadian society upon attaining PR. A targeted approach like this could progress Canada’s efforts to settle, integrate, fulfill needs and retain international students who are highly skilled and ready to contribute within Canada.

There have been innovative solutions which demonstrate that settlement and integration stakeholders can aid international students settlement into communities across Canada. The Connector Program, based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, helps link international students and immigrants with community leaders and local businesses that ensure newcomers expand socially and professionally via networks, finding work, and improving language. xviii All these factors are essential to successful settlement and integration. This program has been replicated in 20 communities across Canada and has received global appraisal from the International Economic Development Council. Other notable similar programs located in Alberta are The Career Mentorship Program offered by Edmonton Region Immigrant Employment Council, which connects internationally trained immigrants with local mentors in Edmonton, and the Integrated Mentorship Program which is offered by Immigrant Services Calgary, located in Calgary.

With numbers set to continually rise, this presents an opportunity to increase the number of initiatives like this throughout Canada and Alberta. Doing so could help international students reach their full potential in Canada. Once more this could offer a mutually beneficial relationship in regards to the Canadian economy and international student’s settlement and integration as previously outlined.

Conclusions

International students fare extremely well in Express Entry. The demographic of Canada is rapidly changing, growing international student population presents many challenges, particularly with an increasing number of those wanting to attain PR status. However, this also presents an exciting opportunity to support young, talented international students who want to settle, integrate and contribute to a growing Canadian society.

A more accessible Express Entry system for international students, alongside stronger support for them through settlement and integration services could see them become the skilled workers, entrepreneurs, innovators and exporters of a growing and strengthening contemporary Canadian economy, as well as more active members of their communities.


Endnotes


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


xvi CRS definition: a score out of 1,200 used to benchmark federal economic applications against one another. This is a mechanism of Express Entry, which was established in January 2015 as a way to process residency applications. This score is essentially used as a cut-off point in Express Entry draws, it can be seen as a design to project the likelihood of a candidate being economically successfully in Canada.


xxii Huene, Brianna. Interview by Joe Crowther. Personal interview, Calgary, September 1, 2016.