

Canadian government signals renewed openness to international students

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International graduates of Canadian universities are “the perfect candidates” for citizenship, says immigration minister

Canadian-educated international students are exactly the sort of would-be immigrants this country should be courting, the federal government has said as it moves on election promises to make immigration policy friendlier to international graduates of Canadian postsecondary institutions.

The government’s first step came in late February when it introduced legislation repealing changes made under the previous Conservative government’s [controversial Bill C-24](#) of 2015. Although the Conservatives had made [adjustments](#) over time that generally made immigration policy more favourable to international students, Bill C-24, enforced in their last year in office, made it harder for international graduates of Canadian postsecondary programs to qualify for citizenship.

The federal Liberal government announced that it would reverse sections in C-24 that increased a residency requirement from three years to four and eliminated applicants’ ability to count half of their Canadian study time, up to one year, towards their residency, which was specifically mentioned in the Liberals’ fall election platform.

“International students are the perfect candidates to become Canadian citizens and we are seeking them out, as are other countries around the world,” immigration minister John McCallum told a news conference before the introduction of the new legislation, called Bill C-6. “It makes no sense for Canada to punch them in the nose by taking away their 50 percent [residency] credit.”

In mid-March, Mr. McCallum also told reporters that his department would be setting up talks between the federal government and provincial officials to look at how to reform Canada’s [Express Entry system](#). That system, in place since June 2015, is often the first step to permanent residency for international students who have completed their Canadian postsecondary programs and who wish to live and work in Canada long-term.

Express Entry has been criticized for putting those graduates in direct competition with other skilled foreign workers, rather than assessing them as a separate category as they used to be, and not valuing their Canadian education as highly as before. Mr. McCallum said foreign students had been “shortchanged” by Express Entry and that more needed to be done to attract them to Canada and encourage them to become permanent residents. The federal-provincial review of the system was just getting underway as of early May.

The changes to citizenship requirements and the plan to review the path to permanent residency are “positive signals,” said Amit Chakma, president of Western University and chair of the federal government’s [Advisory Panel on Canada’s International Education Strategy](#). The panel’s 2012 final report recommended that Canada double the 239,000 international students it receives within a decade to build the country’s future prosperity. As of 2014, Canada had 336,000 international students, nearly 80 percent of them at the postsecondary level.

When it comes to Express Entry, Dr. Chakma supports returning to a separate assessment category for international student graduates. “It all depends on what they [the government] come up with, but I certainly welcome their willingness to look at some of the challenges we are facing.”

Steffi Hamann, a PhD candidate from Germany, said the government’s announcements make her “feel really good” about her decision to continue her academic career in this country. Ms. Hamann came to the University of Guelph in 2012 on an [Ontario Trillium Scholarship](#) designed to attract the best and brightest foreign PhD candidates.

Now in her last year of a doctorate in political science and international development studies, looking at food security, Ms. Hamann hopes to avoid the Express Entry competition to permanent residency by applying through [Ontario's Immigrant Nominee Program](#). It has a specific stream just for PhD graduates (most provinces and territories can nominate a certain number of permanent residency applicants that they feel best meet the province's needs). That stream also eliminates the need for her to already have a year's worth of full-time Canadian skilled work experience, generally required under Express Entry.

Still, while she says Canada is more welcoming than many countries, she said there was panic and disappointment last year when international students learned they would no longer be assessed in their own separate category for permanent residency, especially since many pay higher tuition fees that can reach beyond \$40,000 a year for some programs. "There's a sense ... that we made this investment and [we've] clearly indicated that we value being educated in this particular country, so it was a bit of a slap in the face," she said.

Slow processing times for study visas can also be a sore spot for international students. "There's always complaints about that," said Navneet Khinda, president of the University of Alberta Students' Union, adding that clarifying and simplifying all the immigration processes international students face would help too. The Canadian Bureau for International Education reported a 30 per cent increase in study permit processing times in 2015. However Citizenship and Immigration Canada says processing times have improved, with an average of 38 days in 2015 compared to 48 days in 2013 and even fewer days for students from Canada's top source countries, such as China and India.

The CBIE "hopes that the government will make it easier for international students to get study and work permits in a timely manner, as well as create clear pathways to permanent residency for those international students who choose to stay and contribute to Canada's future," said the organization's president Karen McBride in an emailed statement.

International graduates of Canadian postsecondary programs reported having a harder time under Express Entry initially because they usually lacked a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) filed by an employer to show whether a foreign worker is needed to fill a job. While not required to apply for permanent residency, having an LMIA automatically gave a substantial boost to the number of points the applicant received under the Express Entry system. The immigration department has acknowledged that almost all those successful in the early rounds of the new system had LMIA's, but that has since changed. Some 22 percent of those invited to apply for permanent residency out of the Express Entry system in 2015 had previously held a Canadian study permit.

The CBIE commented that while the system initially seemed unfavourable to international students, the immigration department does seem open to making adjustments and that in the long run it may end up being even more beneficial to international students due to its faster processing time. It also said that it is too early to verify what the overall effect of immigration policy changes over the last year has been on international student choices vis-à-vis Canada.

Toronto immigration lawyer Guidy Mamann also had initial concerns about Express Entry but said it is shaping up to be a good system that will favour the Canadian experience international students already have. "Provided they apply properly and are properly advised, they are almost a shoe-in for Canadian permanent residency," said Mr. Mamann, who has acted for thousands of international students over the years.

Regardless of the details though, sending out a clear, positive message of welcome to international students will make more of a difference to their choices than a process that may ultimately favour them but is too cumbersome to easily understand, said Dr. Chakma. "When they have other opportunities, anything that can be perceived to be a barrier becomes negative," he said. "Signals matter."