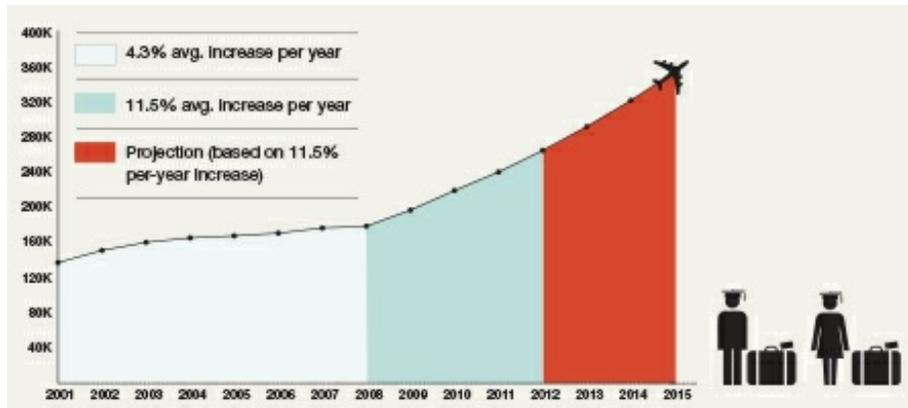


Changes to immigration rules are a boon to international student recruitment

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Fastest growing economic immigrant class is Canadian Experience Class, which favours foreign graduates of Canadian universities for permanent residency.



Number of international students in Canada. Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

International students have become an increasingly integral part of Canada's immigration strategy as a result of ongoing changes to federal regulations aimed at recruiting more highly skilled newcomers to the country.

The federal government has made incremental revisions to immigration rules in recent years designed to tap into this desirable pool of potential immigrants, said Harald Bauder, academic director of [Ryerson University's Centre for Immigration and Settlement](#). It's been "a creeping transition" away from a system that assesses would-be economic migrants on a points system towards a two-step process that admits international students and foreign skilled workers on a temporary basis before allowing them to transition to permanent residency status.

"It's not a reform that's been passed by Parliament," Dr. Bauder said. "It's an incremental approach. And if you put all the different puzzle pieces together, then you end up with a different [immigration] system."

The [Canadian Experience Class](#) stream, introduced in 2008, is a central piece of that puzzle. Although it accounts for a small proportion of economic immigrants admitted to Canada, it is the fastest growing class. The CEC allows skilled foreign workers who have been working in Canada on a temporary basis and foreign graduates of Canadian postsecondary institutions with work experience to apply for permanent residency without leaving the country. In the past, foreign students wishing to immigrate to Canada were required to return to their home country to apply. Since the program's inception five years ago, more than 20,000 permanent residents have entered Canada through the CEC.

The Conservative government eased CEC requirements at the start of 2013. As of January, foreign students may stay in the country for up to three years following graduation, instead of two, giving them more time to gain the Canadian work experience needed to qualify for permanent residency. The government also reduced the work requirement period to 12 months from 24. After three years, permanent residents may apply for Canadian citizenship.

Dr. Bauder said the changes help get around one of the major problems facing those admitted under the points system. Although highly skilled, these immigrants often have difficulty finding work in their fields because employers don't recognize foreign credentials and work experience, or because they lack adequate language skills. Foreign students who graduate with a Canadian degree or diploma aren't likely to face the same challenges, he said.

"In a way [foreign students] are the ideal immigrants if you assume the perspective that you want immigrants who produce economic benefits for Canada," said Dr. Bauder. "They are ready to enter the labour market and start paying taxes." However, one question no one is addressing is whether Canada is justified in encouraging the exodus of highly trained workers from their home countries, he added.

Canada has set a target of accepting 10,000 permanent residents through the CEC program this year. In 2011, the most recent year for which figures are available, Canada admitted almost 4,000 principal applicants through the CEC plus 2,000 spouses and dependents. About half were former international students.

Almost 240,000 international students were studying in Canada in 2011, according to Citizenship and Immigration Canada data cited in a 2012 report by the Canadian Bureau for International Education; about half of these were enrolled in universities. The number of foreign students studying in Canada at all levels of education has been growing more quickly in recent years. The year-over-year increase averaged 11.5 percent from 2008 to 2011, up from an average of 4.3 percent from 2001 to 2008, according to CIC.

CBIE, a non-profit agency, attributed the growth partly to favourable policy changes that have made Canada a more attractive destination for foreign students. "For many years international students and international graduates of our institutions were somewhat ignored," said Jennifer Humphries, CBIE vice-president of membership, public policy and communications. "I think there just wasn't a strong understanding that they were golden, in a sense, because they had Canadian credentials, they had already integrated to some extent and they had shown adaptability ... I think there's been a major shift."

Postsecondary institutions include information about immigration policies in their promotional materials, although they take care to emphasize that the primary reason students should come to Canada is for their studies, she added. "But it is a very important thing for many students to know that there are potential opportunities that might lead to permanent residence status or longer-term work experience after graduation," Ms. Humphries said.

The immigration changes help to make Canada more attractive to foreign students and "make a positive contribution to our ability to attract international students," said Doug Weir, executive director of student programs and services at University of Alberta International. "At the same time, Canadian institutions like the University of Alberta have really upped their game in attracting international students," he said.

In addition to changes to the CEC, the federal government has revised rules governing temporary work permits for international students. The Post-Graduation Work Permit program allows students to work for up to three years after completing their studies with no restriction on the type of employment. The number of work permits issued under this program has doubled since the government revised it in 2008. Off-campus work permits allow students to work up to 20 hours a week during regular academic sessions. The government has proposed allowing full-time international students with valid study permits to automatically be eligible to work off campus starting in 2014, eliminating the need to apply for a separate work permit. If approved, this will put Canada ahead of what other major host countries offer, Ms. Humphries observed.

International students may also transition to permanent residency through the PhD stream of the Federal Skilled Worker Program and the student stream of the Provincial Nominee Program. Several provinces, including New Brunswick and Newfoundland, have made international student recruitment a priority as a means of offsetting local population declines.

Still, there are challenges. The number of permanent residents admitted under the CEC class has consistently fallen

short of targets since the program was introduced. One reason for this may be that the weak job market has made it difficult for new graduates to find employment and gain the work experience needed to qualify, said Sophia Lowe, manager of community engagement at World Education Services, a non-profit agency that provides credential evaluation services and conducts research on international education. But, she added, the program seems to be picking up steam.

The federal government's expert advisory panel on international education led by Western University President Amit Chakma recommended further expanding the CEC program and promoting it more.

The immigration changes have had implications for postsecondary institutions as well, requiring them to revamp the settlement services they offer. Sonja Knutson, acting director of Memorial University's International Centre and manager of the international student advising office, said settlement services have changed dramatically over the past decade. Memorial now offers a professional skills development program to help foreign students with job searches and interview skills. Another program is designed to teach them about launching their own businesses. Memorial also provides language training and other support services to spouses and children of foreign students.

"We want to make it clear that we will do everything we can to support them if they choose to stay," Ms. Knutson said. Ten years ago, she noted, settlement services usually involved airport pick-up and help with finding housing and completing forms.

It isn't just Canada and its provinces that are taking a second look at international students. The United States has proposed granting visas and green cards to foreign students with advanced degrees in science, technology, engineering and math immediately after graduation. If approved, the move would "definitely be worrisome" for Canada since the U.S. is already the top destination for international students despite it not having a strong recruitment strategy, said Ms. Humphries of the CBIE.

Canada accepts about five percent of international students worldwide, placing it in seventh position behind top host countries the U.S., U.K., France, China, Australia and Germany.

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