
THE CANADIAN EXPRESS ENTRY SYSTEM FOR SELECTING ECONOMIC IMMIGRANTS: PROGRESS AND PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

By Daniel Hiebert

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Executive Summary

In January 2015, Canada implemented the Express Entry system—a points-based, two-stage scheme to vet prospective economic immigrants seeking permanent residency. This was a revolutionary departure from the first come, first served points-based system instituted in the 1960s, which had proven incapable of coping with the high volume of applications that followed substantial increases in permanent immigration targets that began in the late 1980s.

The earlier first come, first served system faced several limitations. First, it was inflexible, and by the 2000s, massive backlogs and years-long processing times stymied employers' desires to bring in qualified workers whose skills matched the needs of the Canadian economy. Moreover, the immigrant selection system had vacillated for decades between a strategy that emphasized employment by prioritizing applicants who already held job offers, and one that gave priority to human capital. A widespread view that the skills of newly arrived economic immigrants were discounted by Canadian employers suggested that the selection system was failing to strike an optimum balance between these competing approaches.

Express Entry seeks to address several of these deficiencies while also harnessing the power of newer technologies. The system employs a digital platform to assess whether profiles submitted by prospective immigrants meet minimum eligibility requirements. Eligible profiles are then awarded points based on a variety of factors, chosen in an attempt to evaluate candidates' human capital, the transferability of their skills, and their ability to integrate successfully. The relative weights of these factors, along with minimum points thresholds, are set by the Comprehensive Ranking System—a dynamic rubric that officials can adjust at any time to ensure immigration targets are being met and that those invited to apply for residency have skills suited to the economy's demands. For instance, when it became clear that the economic immigration targets set by Parliament were not going to be met under a ranking structure that favored those with a job offer in Canada, the weight of the selection criteria and minimum points thresholds were adjusted to widen the pool of prospective immigrants.

While Express Entry is clearly a step forward for the Canadian immigration system, several limitations remain.

However, the benefits of an easily modified selection system come with significant political implications. That immigration officials are able to quickly and administratively alter selection criteria can make the process opaque. Whereas these types of adjustments were previously scrutinized by the media and subject to public debate, the complexities of the system and a lack of media attention have meant that the public has largely disengaged with the topic of economic immigration. This detachment is problematic given that Express Entry now plays a crucial role in deciding the course of Canada's economic future. Policymakers must therefore find new ways to educate and engage with the public on these issues.

While Express Entry is clearly a step forward for the Canadian immigration system, several limitations remain. As with all economic immigration systems, Express Entry struggles to assess applicants' real versus theoretical skills, and to properly account for entrepreneurial talent and "soft" skills (such as leadership potential and interpersonal communication). The system also lacks creativity in considering the labor-market potential of applicants' family members, and it has not been adapted for low-skilled workers. Although Express Entry has proven nimble enough to balance employment and human capital selection criteria based on input from the private sector, sufficient data are not yet available to determine whether the new system has significantly improved the integration outcomes of new immigrants. Altogether, despite the system's capacity for course correction, economic immigration shortfalls are still likely, indicating that further creative thinking may be necessary.



I. Introduction

Canada's 2015 introduction of the Express Entry system for processing applicants for permanent immigration is, arguably, the most significant change in the country's approach to economic immigration since the introduction of a points-based system for selecting immigrants in 1967. Express Entry was primarily designed to resolve several pressing administrative concerns, including growing application backlogs and evidence that the points-based system alone was not admitting immigrants whose skills matched employers' demand. But while the motivations were primarily administrative, Express Entry has also—whether by design or inadvertently—changed the way that immigration intersects with the Canadian political system.

This report explores how and why Express Entry was designed and looks at its implications for the Canadian immigration system. The report begins by providing a brief summary of the managerial challenges that plagued Canadian policy officials before the adoption of Express Entry. It then considers how they have been ameliorated and speculates on the impact of Express Entry, before turning to the political consequences of the new selection system. The report argues that while Express Entry provides policy officials a powerful and flexible tool, several political consequences require the government to pay increased attention to the way it communicates with the Canadian public.

II. Canadian Immigration: A Victim of Its Own Success?

Canada's original (1967) points-based system for selecting economic migrants was designed to provide a rigorous assessment of the likelihood that an applicant would be able to succeed in the Canadian labor market. (Before the system's adoption, individual immigration officials had discretionary power over these decisions.¹) Applicants were assigned points based on nine criteria, which focused on their human capital, immediate employment prospects, and personal circumstances (e.g., whether they had family members already resident in Canada).² From the outset, Canadian policy officials wrestled with a question that remains salient today: do applicants' long-term prospects depend more on their human capital or on their ability to find work quickly? The system sought to prioritize both. Over the next twenty years there were minor shifts in how points were allocated but in the main, the original criteria were maintained.³ The number of immigrants admitted to Canada under the points system, however, fluctuated a great deal, based on the perceived needs of the economy, with immigration targets falling in times of rising unemployment, and vice versa. In the late 1980s, Canada made a strategic decision to substantially raise its annual target for permanent immigration—a decision that was motivated by both economic and demographic concerns.⁴ The substantial increase in demand for immigrants was met with an increase in

1 Prior to the 1967 introduction of the points-based system, Canadian officials utilized a list of preferred and non-preferred countries in selecting immigrants for admission, and candidates were subjected to personal interviews in which officials exercised discretionary power; over time, the Canadian system has evolved from one based on racial preferences and devolved authority among individual decisionmakers, to one with economic preferences and rule-based decisions.

2 Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

3 Alan G. Green and David A. Green, "Canadian Immigration Policy: The Effectiveness of the Point System and Other Instruments," *The Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue Canadienne D'Economique* 28, no. 4b (1995): 1006–41.

4 A great deal has been written about the evolution of Canadian immigration policy. See, for example, Kelley and Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic*; Phil Triadafilopoulos, *Becoming Multicultural: Immigration and the Politics of Membership in Canada and Germany* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012). The major policy changes of the 1980s are summarized in Daniel Hiebert, *What's So Special about Canada? Understanding the Resilience of Immigration and Multiculturalism* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/whats-so-special-about-canada-understanding-resilience-immigration-and-multiculturalism.



supply: the more open system proved attractive, and hundreds of thousands of individuals from around the world submitted applications.

But this pressure proved to be far more than the system could accommodate, even with the increased targets. Since the system was predicated on a straightforward logic of processing applications in the order in which they were submitted—and the number received exceeded capacity each year—a large backlog developed. Over subsequent decades, processing times for individual applications stretched from months to several years. Moreover, as the Canadian economy evolved, it became increasingly clear that the system was falling short. The skills of some new, tech-savvy applicants were particularly attractive to employers—perhaps more so than some applicants already in the queue—yet Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) was obligated to process applications in the order they had arrived.

At the same time, the central political goals behind the new system—raising permanent immigration targets and prioritizing economic immigrants—had unintended consequences that exerted pressure on the system. Bringing relatively youthful, “labor-market-ready” individuals to Canada was expected to fulfill both economic and demographic objectives.⁵ Inevitably, however, adding economic immigrants to the Canadian population meant a rise in their subsequent demand for family reunification, particularly with parents, and in some cases grandparents. While family members’ applications could not be managed through the economic selection system, the fact that a backlog of these applications was growing fueled public perception that the permanent immigration system, and particularly the system for selecting immigrants, needed to be repaired.

Over subsequent decades, processing times for individual applications stretched from months to several years.

These are problems of success (i.e., heightened interest in Canada, and the follow-on effects of large immigrant cohorts) rather than failure, but they nevertheless presented policy officials with significant challenges. Meanwhile, as the processing times of economic immigrants’ applications grew, employers began to press the government to allow in greater numbers of temporary labor migrants and to ease admission procedures for these new migrants. The government responded to these requests and the population of temporary migrants in Canada grew rapidly, especially during the economic recovery that followed the 2007–08 recession.⁶ This, too, led to sharp public criticism of the federal government’s management of immigration.⁷

Policy officials faced several additional dilemmas in the early 2000s. Research conducted by independent economists, as well as analysts within the government, revealed that new arrivals were experiencing greater difficulty finding jobs that corresponded to their level of education than had been the case a generation earlier.⁸ This meant that the economic integration of these new immigrants was taking longer, muting the potential economic benefits of immigration, at least in the short term.

5 At the time, Canadian officials were concerned with persistently low fertility rates and the prospect of future demographic contraction. See David Ley and Daniel Hiebert, “Immigration Policy as Population Policy,” *The Canadian Geographer* 45, no. 1 (2001): 120–25.

6 The number of temporary foreign workers residing in Canada rose from 114,722 at the end of 2007 to 192,623 five years later, at the end of 2012. See Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), Research and Evaluation Branch, *Facts and Figures: Immigration Overview, Permanent and Temporary Residents, 2012* (Ottawa: CIC, 2012), http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2013/cic/Ci1-8-2012-eng.pdf.

7 Hiebert, *What’s So Special about Canada?*

8 Marc Frenette and René Morissette, “Will They Ever Converge? Earnings of Immigrant and Canadian-Born Workers over the Last Two Decades,” *International Migration Review* 39, no. 1 (2005): 228–57; David A. Green and Christopher Worswick, “Canadian Economics Research on Immigration through the Lens of Theories of Justice,” *Canadian Journal of Economics* 50, no. 5 (2017): 1262–303.



This skills/jobs gap seemed to imply that the selection system was misaligned with the needs of the economy—though this was not a new challenge. As noted earlier, Canadian policy had struggled since the very inception of the 1967 points-based system to reconcile two competing approaches to the selection of economic immigrants: prioritizing demand (i.e., job offers) vs. human capital (demonstrable skills and qualifications).⁹ When the points system was first introduced, it was weighted toward human capital. At other times since, an offer of employment was the key ingredient in admission decisions, most notably during the strained economic circumstances of the early 1980s. Focusing on human capital has again come into favor in recent years, but by the early 2010s, the difficulties many new immigrants faced in finding employment at the right level left many wondering whether this was the best policy choice.

Moreover, it had become clear that the procedures for processing points-based system applications were quickly becoming outdated. When Canada’s points system was designed in the 1960s, the digital age was still in its infancy. Applications were submitted by mail and processed manually as paper moved through the admission system. Though many adjustments were made and various forms of automation were introduced over the years, the logic of the system was firmly rooted in the mid-20th century. Applicants were processed on a “first come, first served” basis, and received simple pass/fail grades. While these ways of processing applications made perfect sense when applications were physical, by the 2000s technology had made possible new and more efficient processing methods, the benefits of which had not yet been fully realized.

Despite these challenges, the Canadian public maintained its support for immigration, and few believed that there was a policy crisis in the making. Nevertheless, there were persistent doubts about the management of the selection system and a will to change it. It is also worth noting two other contextual points. First, many policy shifts and experiments in the field of immigration occurred in the years leading up to 2015, showing that far-reaching policy changes were indeed possible.¹⁰ Second, Canadian policy officials had been paying close attention to the new two-step immigration policies designed and implemented in New Zealand and Australia—systems that seemed promising for Canada. Favorable public attitudes and a recent history of policy change thus created political room for new policy directions, and the Antipodean policy innovations offered potent models for consideration.

III. Express Entry as a Comprehensive Solution

In January 2015, Canadian immigration officials introduced a new system for processing immigration applications, known as Express Entry, in an effort to solve the backlogs and skills mismatches that challenged the existing selection system. The Express Entry system sought to speed up the processing of applications, improve the ability of the selection system to address labor-market needs, reduce the inventory (backlog) of applications, and enable selection of the best applicants.¹¹ This section examines how Express Entry works, its potential benefits, as well as the limitations the system has encountered so far.

9 See Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Stephen Yale-Loehr, *Balancing Interests: Rethinking U.S. Selection of Skilled Immigrants* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996), 126–30; Ana M. Ferrer, Garnett Picot, and William Craig Riddell, “New Directions in Immigration Policy: Canada’s Evolving Approach to the Selection of Economic Immigrants,” *International Migration Review* 48, no. 3 (2014): 846–67.

10 It is worth noting that major policy changes in the field of immigration in Canada can be made through orders-in-council (i.e., instructions from a minister to a department that have received cabinet approval but need not have been debated in Parliament). On the extensive use of orders-in-council to bypass potentially divisive immigration policy change, see Alan G. Green and David A. Green, “The Economic Goals of Canada’s Immigration Policy: Past and Present,” *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse De Politiques* 25, no. 4 (1999): 425–51, www.jstor.org/stable/3552422.

11 According to a senior official from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the third and fourth items on this list were the most enduring concerns (especially the fourth), but all were important. Author conversation with senior IRCC official, June 2018.



A. What Is Express Entry?

Express Entry is a points-based, two-stage system for assessing the economic potential of skilled workers seeking permanent residence in Canada; the system is used to vet potential applicants for Canada's three federal economic immigration programs.¹² Prospective immigrants first submit an online profile, noting their relevant human capital characteristics, occupational history, and so on. Those who meet the minimum eligibility requirements of one or more of Canada's programs are entered in the Express Entry pool. Candidates are then awarded points (up to a maximum of 1,200) for a variety of factors, the relative weights of which are determined by the Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS).¹³ Candidates are then ranked, typically once every two weeks, and those with the highest scores are invited to apply for one or more of the programs.¹⁴

For Canadian policymakers, the introduction of the Express Entry system promised to solve several policy and processing problems simultaneously. Its aims include the following:

- **Rebalance employment vs. human capital approaches.** Express Entry enables Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC, formerly CIC)¹⁵ officials to incorporate both human capital and employer demand into the CRS, and to adjust the mix of these criteria in real time. For example, within the new system, the number of points assigned to candidates holding an offer of appointment can be adjusted quickly, whereas such a change required a far more comprehensive process in the past.
- **Modernize all aspects of the selection system.** The decision to introduce Express Entry enabled CIC to build a brand new system, based on a digital logic, that assumed applications would be completed online, communication would occur electronically, other stakeholders (provinces, employers) could be electronically linked into selection, social media could be harnessed to enable mass communication, and, most importantly, data could be collected at every stage of the process to facilitate research and evaluation of both intermediate and longer-term outcomes.
- **Prevent the buildup of backlogs.** The two-stage application process is designed such that unselected profiles are automatically cleared from the system, meaning that backlogs cannot accumulate (though IRCC officials could, at any point, adjust the system to hold profiles for longer periods if deemed appropriate). Moreover, individuals have the right to resubmit their profiles when they lapse, and therefore face only minor inconvenience.
- **Enable the private sector to have input in selection.** As noted, the CRS can be adjusted to prioritize job offers, and in this way the views of employers can inform selection decisions. Individuals submitting profiles can be encouraged, or even required, to enter their intention to work in Canada in a digital job bank accessible to employers; if they receive an offer of employment, they are entitled to revise their profile accordingly.

12 These include the Federal Skilled Worker Program, Canadian Experience Class, and Federal Skilled Trades Program.

13 For more on the Comprehensive Ranking System and points allocation, see IRCC, "Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) Criteria—Express Entry," updated June 28, 2017, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/express-entry/eligibility/criteria-comprehensive-ranking-system/grid.html.

14 For a more detailed discussion, see Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Kate Hooper, *Competing Approaches to Selecting Economic Immigrants: Points-Based vs. Demand-Driven Systems* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2019), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/selecting-economic-immigrants-points-based-demand-driven-systems.

15 The Canadian governmental department Citizenship and Immigration Canada was renamed Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada in November 2015. The Express Entry system was instituted in January 2015, nearly one year prior to this change. The terminology is therefore different depending on the period in question.



- **Accelerate the assessment process.** Now that the backlog of pre-Express Entry applications is fully cleared, IRCC is able to meet its goal of assessing 80 percent of profiles within a six-month period, thanks to the new system's streamlined design.

Express Entry not only resolved the extensive and varied set of concerns that existed under the former system, it did so in a way that enabled policy officials to continue adjusting the system to meet evolving needs and policy ideas. IRCC has never before operated with such a flexible set of selection tools. In sum, Express Entry represents more than a new method of selecting economic immigrants—rather, it is something of a policy revolution.

B. The Experimental Phase: What Has Express Entry Achieved So Far?

Approximately 112,000 individuals submitted profiles to the Express Entry system in the first half of 2015,¹⁶ and by the end of the year this number had increased to slightly more than 191,000.¹⁷ That pace has continued, with nearly 600,000 profiles submitted¹⁸ during the system's first three years.¹⁹

From the outset, the ratio of ineligible profiles has been quite high. In 2016, for example, approximately 45 percent of the profiles submitted were rejected on the grounds that they did not meet the requirements of any of Canada's admission categories.²⁰ There are several reasons why this may occur: individuals may begin the process of submitting a profile but fail to complete it; they may not understand the requirements of the admission categories and submit a complete profile that is ineligible; or individuals may submit a profile while they are in the process of upgrading their human capital and plan to revise it at a later date when they better fulfill the requirements of an admission program.

Prospective immigrants who meet the minimum eligibility requirements for Express Entry are subsequently awarded points (up to 1,200) according to a variety of factors set out in the CRS. Ranking factors are divided into three categories:

- human capital (such as age, level of education, language proficiency, and work experience in Canada), for a maximum of 500 points;
- skill transferability (including education, foreign work experience, and qualification certificates), for a maximum of 100 points; and
- additional factors (including the presence of siblings in Canada, high levels of language proficiency, postsecondary education in Canada, and arranged employment), for a maximum of 600 points.²¹

As policymakers continue to analyze the profiles deemed eligible for Express Entry, several clear trends have emerged that, in turn, have informed the adjustment of minimum admission thresholds for the various factors considered in the CRS.

16 IRCC, "Express Entry Mid-Year Report 2015," updated July 31, 2015, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/express-entry-midyear-report-2015.html.

17 IRCC, "Express Entry Year-End Report 2015," updated March 15, 2017, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/express-entry-year-end-report-2015.html.

18 It should be noted that this number may include multiple applications from the same person. This occurs when a person applies for more than one admission program or submits a new profile after an earlier one expires.

19 The number of profiles submitted to the Express Entry system was 598,507 as of January 3, 2018. See IRCC, "Express Entry Year-End Report 2017," updated June 21, 2018, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/express-entry-year-end-report-2017.html.

20 IRCC, "Express Entry Year-End Report 2016," updated April 26, 2017, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/express-entry-year-end-report-2016.html.

21 IRCC, "Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) Criteria—Express Entry."



I. Insufficient Numbers of Applications with Employment Offers

In the first few months after Express Entry took effect, all of the individuals invited to submit an application already had a job offer in Canada (many were already in fact working in Canada, under the Temporary Foreign Worker program), and the admission threshold for the CRS was more than 800 points. Since then, the number of prospective applicants with a job offer has been too low to meet Canada's target for economic immigration, and the points threshold has been dropped (typically to approximately 450 points) to include individuals with high human capital but without a job in Canada at the time they submit their profile. It is interesting to note that 16 percent of successful candidates in the first year of Express Entry fell into the categories of restaurant supervisors and cooks.²² In most of these cases, applicants did not score highly on human capital indices, but they had job offers. In fact, while the original justification for Express Entry was its responsiveness to employers, the CRS scoring system currently focuses overwhelmingly on human capital. Whereas 600 points were initially assigned to a job offer, in late 2016 this allocation was reassigned to 50 points for most forms of employment, or 200 points for the very small number of applicants with a job offer in the most senior forms of management.²³

While the original justification for Express Entry was its responsiveness to employers, the CRS scoring system currently focuses overwhelmingly on human capital.

Significantly, in 2017, IRCC dropped the requirement that applicants submitting profiles must also register in a Canadian job bank.²⁴ The CRS's decreasing emphasis on employment meant that the ratio of successful applicants already working in Canada dropped, from 78 percent in 2015 to slightly less than 50 percent in 2017. Express Entry has thus been in large part realigned with a principle that has animated Canadian economic selection in recent decades—namely, that human capital is the best indicator of potential success. The changes also demonstrate the flexibility of the system.

2. Shifts in Applicants' Countries of Origin

Downgrading the value of points allocated for a job offer had two other important consequences. Before the introduction of Express Entry, as noted, there was high demand for temporary foreign workers. Generally speaking, permanent residents admitted to Canada under the Federal Skilled Workers program (the main pathway for economic immigrants) came from everywhere around the world.²⁵ Such diversity could also be found, though to a lesser degree, among skilled temporary foreign workers. While many came from low- and middle-income countries, skilled workers were disproportionately from English- and French-speaking countries, most of them in Europe. Canadian employers apparently preferred individuals

22 IRCC, "Express Entry Year-End Report 2015."

23 IRCC, "Express Entry: Early Observations on November 2016 Improvements," updated December 22, 2017, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/express-entry-early-observations-november-2016.html.

24 IRCC, "Express Entry Year-End Report 2017."

25 In fact, the original points system was designed, in part, to ensure that Canada's selection of economic immigrants would be based on economic rather than racial criteria, and the profile of Canadian economic immigrants changed rapidly as a result. See Reginald Whitaker, *Canadian Immigration Policy since Confederation* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991).



already fluent in an official language, and familiar with Western cultural norms.²⁶ In the early phase of Express Entry, when the preferences of employers were a decisive ingredient in admission decisions, the profile of those admitted as permanent residents began to drift toward that of temporary workers in the earlier era (for example, the top five countries of origin for admissions through Express Entry in 2015 were India, the United States, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and China). As the system's criteria shifted to prioritize human capital over offers of employment, there was a return to the earlier patterns for permanent residents (for instance, in 2017 the top countries of origin of those invited to apply were India, China, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom). These shifts are perhaps subtle, but nevertheless in the direction of a more globalized intake.

3. Shortfalls

Throughout its first three years of operation, the bulk of profiles uploaded to Express Entry were well below the points thresholds set for admission. At the end of 2015, approximately two-thirds of the eligible profiles in the system had been assigned between 300 and 399 points.²⁷ Two years later, at the end of 2017, there were 71,000 active profiles and, of these, close to 50,000 were associated with fewer than 400 points (the lowest cutoff used in 2017 was 413 points). Slightly more than 20,000 profiles were potentially relevant for admission, with between 400 and 449 points. The number with more than 450 points, a group that likely to be invited to apply, was slightly less than 1,500.²⁸ In 2018, the Parliament of Canada accepted the Minister of IRCC's recommendation to set an annual target of 310,000 permanent immigrants, and specifically 177,500 economic immigrants.²⁹ The inventory of Express Entry profiles at the start of the year was insufficient to meet this goal, leaving the system dependent on the steady submission of new profiles. If this remains the case, IRCC is very likely to maintain its rapid rate of profile and application processing, but it also signals a degree of risk, or at least the prospect that IRCC may need to reach "deeper" into its pool of profiles (in other words, reduce CRS thresholds and admit individuals with lower levels of human capital).³⁰

C. Assessing the Impact of Express Entry

Theoretically, permanent immigrants' economic integration is likely to benefit from the Express Entry system for two primary reasons: for the first time, IRCC has been able to select "the best and the brightest" prospective immigrants (that is, rather than simply setting a passing grade for economic immigrants, as before, IRCC is now able to rank all applicants and choose only those with the highest CRS scores); and the system can be more closely calibrated, in real time, to the needs of employers and the economy more generally.

It is too soon to test this assumption. As noted, when the new system was introduced, Canada had an enormous backlog of applications for its various economic admission categories. At the end of 2014,

26 See, for example, Philip Oreopoulos, "Why Do Skilled Immigrants Struggle in the Labor Market? A Field Experiment with Thirteen Thousand Resumes," *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 3, no. 4 (2011): 148–71, <http://oreopoulos.faculty.economics.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Why-Do-Skilled-Immigrants-Struggle-in-the-Labor-Market.pdf>; Rupa Banerjee, Jeffrey Reitz, and Philip Oreopoulos, *Do Large Employers Treat Racial Minorities More Fairly? A New Analysis of Canadian Field Experiment Data* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2017), <https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Which-employers-discriminate-Banerjee-Reitz-Oreopoulos-January-2017.pdf>.

27 IRCC, "Express Entry Year-End Report 2015."

28 IRCC, "Express Entry Year-End Report 2017."

29 IRCC, "Notice—Supplementary Information 2018–2020 Immigration Levels Plan," updated November 1, 2017, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/supplementary-immigration-levels-2018.html.

30 A senior IRCC official noted that the number of profiles submitted during the first half of 2018 was, generally, on track to be sufficient to meet the targets set for that year. Regarding reaching "deeper" into the pool, this is done regularly for the Federal Skilled Trades program. Very few applicants to this program pass the human capital threshold of Express Entry. To overcome this challenge, a separate draw, only for this category, was implemented in 2017. See IRCC, "Express Entry Year-End Report 2017."



there were more than 600,000 applications at various stages of the determination process, representing several years of supply given the target for economic immigration projected for 2015.³¹ Since then, CIC/IRCC has engaged in a dual strategy of continuing to process the pre-2015 inventory of applications while slowly increasing Express Entry admissions. The share of Express Entry admissions began to exceed that of previous applications in 2017.³² Meanwhile, the most reliable indicator of economic integration in Canada is the Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB), which links admission files to the tax returns submitted by immigrants.³³ The IMDB is updated annually, but there is always a two-to-three-year lag before data become available. As of mid-2018, the IMDB enabled researchers examine data from the 2015 tax cycle—the first year in which the Express Entry system operated, and a year when economic admissions were still significantly dominated by applications submitted before the new system was announced.³⁴

Analysts can only speculate regarding the outcomes of the system's design, including the recalibrations that CIC/IRCC have made since 2015. It will take another two to three years before it becomes fully clear whether those selected under Express Entry will achieve more favorable economic integration than those admitted through earlier systems.

IV. Limitations of Express Entry

While there are better and worse forms of policy, none are perfect. Even though Express Entry represents a major step forward for Canada's selection policy, a number of challenges remain. Some of these are intrinsic to any form of selection, while others could be addressed with more innovative approaches, as well as modifications to the Express Entry system.

A. Real vs. Theoretical Skills

Perhaps the most significant challenge to any selection system is the potential gap between “theoretical” and “real” skills.³⁵ What does a person need to be acknowledged as a professional in the labor market and be offered a desirable job? Credentials are a vital ingredient in this process but by no means the only one. Individuals are also judged by other characteristics, including their competence and soft skills. Credentials and competence are related to one another, but they are not the same thing. For example, the *World Directory of Medical Schools* lists 2,800 degree-granting institutions.³⁶ Presumably, virtually all of these offer a Doctor of Medicine degree. Would health boards and other employers assume that a student graduating from a top-ranked university in this system has exactly the same competencies as one graduating from a bottom-ranked institution? Or that two persons achieving a medical degree from the same institution, one in 1980 and the other in 2018, are equivalent given the pace of advancement in medical knowledge? All of

31 This figure was provided to the author by a senior IRCC official in June 2018. It is difficult to project the exact number of years of supply this number represents, given that not all applications are successful; nevertheless, 600,000 applications would yield a very large number of admissions.

32 IRCC, “Express Entry Year-End Report 2017.”

33 Statistics Canada, “Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB),” updated November 24, 2017, www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&Id=420104.

34 Based on discussions with representatives of nongovernmental organizations that support immigrant settlement, and the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia, it is too early to tell if newcomers' ability to enter the labor market has improved since the implementation of Express Entry.

35 This point lies behind the introduction of the Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent system and was stressed by the CEO of the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia (see Box 1).

36 World Federation for Medical Education and the Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research, “World Directory of Medical Schools,” updated June 1, 2016, www.wdoms.org/.



these individuals carry the same credentials (theoretical skills), but they are very likely to be received by employers in different ways based on perceived real skills, or competence.

Similarly, it cannot be assumed that “hard” skills (for example, foreign language proficiency, computer programming, or machine repair skills) and “soft” skills (such as communication, time management, and leadership ability) are correlated. The capacity to acquire knowledge is not necessarily the same as the ability to mobilize and transfer knowledge. Employers, understandably, prioritize individuals who appear capable of both. Furthermore, employers are more likely to offer jobs to applicants who appear to be attuned to the cultural norms and expectations of local workplaces.

Selection systems, however elaborate, cannot easily incorporate all of the dimensions that lie behind competence and soft skills. On the other hand, it could be argued that they should not necessarily try to incorporate all such dimensions, for ethical reasons (for instance, if employers sometimes draw upon racialized stereotypes in the hiring process, it does not follow that selection systems must incorporate those biases for the purpose of rapid economic integration). Still, the Express Entry system could be adjusted to more closely align with the legitimate expectations of employers. In particular, competency testing could be introduced. The Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) program of the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia provides a helpful example of this approach (see Box 1).

Box 1. Testing Skills during Express Entry: The Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) Program

The Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) program of the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia is a free online program that enables individuals to prove their competence in a number of fields. Individuals may take any of several tests designed by instructors of skills programs, such as those focused on carpentry or IT services. The tests are comprehensive and exacting, and can take as many as 30 hours to complete. Candidates are graded on several competencies within the particular occupation (for example, there are more than a dozen scores for specific carpentry competencies, such as framing and cement forming). At this point, FAST is only available in English, which is both a weakness and a strength. Obviously, a multilingual capacity would serve more prospective immigrants; however, employers are likely to be particularly interested in those individuals who are able to demonstrate their proficiency in English as well as in the skills required for their business. Early indications suggest that employers take FAST scores seriously, with high employment rates for those who pass the tests, but the program is still quite new.

Sources: Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia, “FAST: Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent,” accessed February 15, 2019, <https://fastbc.org/>; author conversation with Patrick MacKenzie, the CEO of the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia, July 2018

B. Differences in the Outcomes of Principal Applicants and Their Dependents

The fact that selection systems, including Express Entry, concentrate more or less exclusively on the characteristics of an individual person but can lead to the immigration of the person’s entire family, deserves more attention. One could argue that it is rather surprising for these systems to constantly finetune the requirements for just one person (the principal applicant), while largely ignoring others in the family unit (spouses and dependents, in the terminology of the Canadian system). Research conducted both inside and outside government has revealed a large gap between the economic outcomes of principal



applicants to Canada's economic programs and those of their spouses or partners; principal applicants, for example, are far more likely to find employment and earn better salaries.³⁷

Applicants to Express Entry have the option to either apply as an individual and extend their right of admission to include accompanying family members, or to apply jointly with their spouse, in which case a relatively small number of points is allocated based on the human capital of the spouse (currently 40 points out of 1,200 in the CRS).³⁸ It would be relatively straightforward to revise the Express Entry system to take the characteristics of both partners into greater consideration. For example, if a CRS passing grade in a particular draw is 440, it would be possible to assign a passing grade of 850, say, for a couple that applied jointly. In this theoretical example, both individuals have 425 points. Neither would be admitted given the original cutoff value of 440, but both are likely to be successful in Canada, with little gap to be expected between their outcomes. This policy innovation would also reward equal investment in the human capital of both partners, rather than of one individual (typically the male in a heterosexual union).

C. Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a third issue that is difficult to accommodate within systems such as Express Entry. While many countries around the world have established programs to encourage business immigration (for entrepreneurs, investors, or both), there is little evidence that points-based systems are capable of discerning entrepreneurial potential.³⁹ Simply put, there is no guarantee that successful entrepreneurship in one cultural and economic context can be replicated in another. Yet the replacement of Canada's aging cohort of small- and medium-scale entrepreneurs is a pressing issue, especially outside metropolitan areas.⁴⁰ While it may be difficult for the CRS to incorporate characteristics that might predict entrepreneurial success, it would be possible for the Express Entry system to better acknowledge entrepreneurial activities conducted in Canada by prospective immigrants. Currently, individuals applying via Express Entry to the Canadian Experience Class are granted points for Canadian labor-market experience, but self-employment is excluded from this calculation.⁴¹ As an alternative, the system could offer points to applicants who have demonstrated successful entrepreneurship in Canada.

D. Low-Skilled Workers

Finally, points-based selection systems, Express Entry included, assume that an economy needs only highly skilled workers. And yet in Canada and elsewhere, temporary foreign worker programs are

37 Daniel Hiebert, "The Economic Integration of Immigrants in Metropolitan Vancouver," *IRPP Choices* 15, no. 7 (2009): 2–42, <https://on-irpp.org/2JIKpk6>; Arthur Sweetman and Casey Warman, "The Structure of Canada's Immigration System and Canadian Labour Market Outcomes" (working paper 1292, Department of Economics, Queen's University, Ontario, January 2012), http://econ.queensu.ca/working_papers/papers/qed_wp_1292.pdf; Keir Armstrong and Christopher Worswick, *Spousal Characteristics and the Selection of Economic Immigrants* (Ottawa: CIC, 2013), www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/research-stats/r139-2012_spousalcharacteristics.pdf.

38 IRCC, "Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) Criteria—Express Entry." Note that these points are not added to those of the principal applicant, but replace points the principal applicant could have been awarded on his or her own—therefore, the human capital of the spouse would only be included in the application process if it is higher than that of the principal applicant.

39 David Ley, "Seeking Homo Economicus: The Canadian State and the Strange Story of the Business Immigration Program," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 2 (2003): 426–41; Kareem El-Assal, *Entrepreneur and Investor Immigration: Creating Jobs and Growth* (Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada, 2017).

40 Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada, Small Business Branch, *Key Small Business Statistics: June 2016* (Ottawa: Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada, 2016), 25, [www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/061.nsf/vwaj/KSBS-PSRPE_June-Juin_2016_eng-V2.pdf](http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/061.nsf/vwaj/KSBS-PSRPE_June-Juin_2016_eng-V2.pdf/$file/KSBS-PSRPE_June-Juin_2016_eng-V2.pdf).

41 The author thanks Kareem El-Assal of the Conference Board of Canada for raising this point in a private conversation about the research program of the Conference Board of Canada as it relates to business immigration. For more on this and recommendations for entrepreneurial selection criteria, see Kareem El-Assal and Sara Rose Taylor, *Turning the Corner: Improving Canadian Business Immigration* (Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada, 2019), www.conferenceboard.ca/e-Library/abstract.aspx?did=10181.



routinely used to recruit low-skilled workers, while the private sector frequently lobbies to open more permanent immigration pathways for them.⁴² The principal pathways for low-skilled workers to attain permanent residence in Canada is through Provincial Nominee Programs⁴³ rather than the national immigration system. Representatives of nongovernmental organizations serving immigrants have noted that low-skilled newcomers obtain work very quickly in Canada though, of course, at correspondingly low rates of pay. While the Express Entry system has not been adapted to low-skilled migration, it would be possible to adjust its parameters to do so. Just as the Canadian Experience Program could be revised to acknowledge entrepreneurial activities in Canada, criteria could also be introduced to grant permanent residence to a targeted number of low- or medium-skilled workers who have been employed in Canada for a specified number of years under a temporary program. The Caregiver Program (for home-based care workers) offers precedent.⁴⁴

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Although there are several ongoing challenges that Express Entry does not mitigate, and several ways the system could be revised to be even more innovative, there is no indication that Express Entry has proven too complex or costly to operate efficiently, or that it is unable to deliver the number of economic immigrants mandated by rising annual targets. The introduction of a substantially new system occurred rather smoothly, and it has already eliminated the application backlog for skilled workers.⁴⁵ In part, this is related to the system's inherent flexibility, which could, in the future, become something of a political liability.

V. The Politics of Express Entry

Beyond its administrative impact, Express Entry has arguably changed the way in which the political system and the public engage with decisions about permanent immigration to Canada. This shift becomes clear if one compares, say, debates on changing the points system threshold that occurred before the introduction of Express Entry to the lack of public debate today.

Approximately 15 years ago, the Minister of CIC, Denis Coderre, introduced several important changes to the selection of economic immigrants. The most notable of these was that the threshold for passing the

42 For example, Chris Sorensen, "Why Canada Needs Its Temporary Foreign-Worker Program," *Maclean's*, May 24, 2014, www.macleans.ca/economy/business/with-a-little-help-from-afar/. Note the subtitle of the article: "Chris Sorensen examines the false furor over the program and why businesses are desperate for it."

43 Most Canadian provinces and territories have agreements with IRCC to operate Provincial Nominee Programs. Under these programs, a province or territory determines selection parameters based on local needs and nominates individuals who meet these criteria, and who then may apply to IRCC for permanent residence.

44 Under this program, individuals hired by Canadians (as temporary foreign workers) to care for children or family members are entitled to apply for permanent residence after two years of continuous work. See IRCC, "Caregivers—Options for Permanent Residence," updated October 3, 2018, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/caregivers.html.

45 Author conversation with senior IRCC official, June 2018.



points system was to be increased from 70 to 75 points in June 2002 (at that time the maximum number of points was 100). He also announced that applications submitted prior to that date would be reviewed under the new system, meaning that many applicants who had expected to pass the threshold would be rejected. Prospective immigrants launched a lawsuit that ultimately reached the Supreme Court, which, in 2003, ruled against the retroactive part of the policy change, insisting that applications submitted prior to the change be assessed under the rules that existed when they were submitted. The court also presented CIC with an injunction, essentially prohibiting the ministry from rejecting any pre-2002 applications until a credible plan to implement the mandated changes was in place.⁴⁶ Shortly after this decision was handed down, Minister Coderre announced that a new points threshold of 67 would be implemented immediately. This dramatic move meant that millions of individuals around the world became eligible for immigration to Canada. But without an administrative mechanism to limit the additional intake of applications, this decision created conditions that ultimately led to the enormous backlog of applications that built up over the next decade.⁴⁷

While these and similar changes to the points system sparked extensive media debates and even court challenges in the past, changes such as those made by Minister Coderre in 2002 can now be executed easily within the Express Entry system. It is now straightforward to adjust the CRS points threshold on a biweekly basis, and when this happens, all profiles in the system are judged according to the threshold associated with a particular “draw,” not the one in place when the application was received.

The shift from the situation in the early 2000s to the one that exists today could be labelled “administrative depoliticization.”⁴⁸ A policy change that was politically charged in the earlier era is now a simple administrative decision made without fanfare and completely ignored by the media. Information about these operations is made available by IRCC on a quarterly basis, but journalists have shown no interest in these reports. Even the larger changes made to Express Entry, such as downgrading the points assigned to a job offer, have largely gone unnoticed.

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Of course, there are benefits inherent in policymakers’ ability to adjust admission criteria, fix problems, and experiment with new policies without facing a barrage of media scrutiny and possible criticism. However, one could argue that this depoliticization has led to a situation where the public is unaware of—and disinterested in—major policy decisions around economic immigration. In part, this may be a product of the complexity of Express Entry. It is easy to understand a system with a single passing grade and a first come, first served application process, but much more challenging to convey the nuances

46 Campbell Clark, “Immigration Rules Spark Suit,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 1, 2003 (updated April 18, 2018), www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/immigration-rules-spark-suit/article1159567/; CIC, “Immigration Department’s Appeal Dismissed,” CIC News, June 1, 2003, www.cicnews.com/2003/06/immigration-departments-appeal-dismissed-06253.html.

47 These events were widely reported in the media, including in a September 2003 editorial published by *The Globe and Mail* titled “Immigration Bungling,” which opened with the sentence: “It is becoming difficult to feel much confidence in Canada’s Immigration Minister, Denis Coderre, and the direction he is setting for the country’s immigration policy.” See *The Globe and Mail*, “Immigration Bungling,” *The Globe and Mail*, September 24, 2003 (updated April 18, 2018), www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/immigration-bungling/article1341114/.

48 Matthew Flinders and Jim Buller, “Depoliticisation: Principles, Tactics, and Tools,” *British Politics* 1, no. 3 (2006): 293–318, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/palgrave.bp.4200016>; Eva E. A. Wolf and Wouter Van Dooren, “Conflict Reconsidered: The Boomerang Effect of Depoliticization in the Policy Process,” *Public Administration* 96, no. 2 (2018): 286–301.



of a highly dynamic and flexible system that might prioritize IT workers today, and accountants or electricians tomorrow. Perhaps the most easily digested message about Express Entry is this: the Canadian government is operating a sophisticated system that admits immigrants with skills that are carefully calibrated to the needs of the Canadian economy. Although such a synopsis is appealing, it could also be read with skepticism in an age of populist politics when policymakers are often portrayed as out-of-touch elites.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly easy to hold public services to account. Information that was once difficult to acquire outside government is now freely available. As noted, IRCC has released an ongoing set of dense, highly informative reports on Express Entry that provide statistics on the profiles submitted to the system, the profiles of individuals who have been invited to apply, and the profiles of individuals who have been admitted. This is a tremendous resource, but one that can only be appreciated by those who already have some understanding of selection policy and how the admission system functions. Canadian media have barely noticed this rich field of information.

This makes it far more difficult for the minister or senior officials of IRCC to conduct an ongoing conversation with an informed Canadian public, since the background knowledge required for this conversation is not widely held.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Express Entry is fundamental to the entire rationale for economic immigration, which promises to help stabilize Canada's demographic situation while also providing an economic stimulus. One could easily argue that immigration is, essentially, defining the course of Canada's future economy and that Express Entry has become the centerpiece of this process. As such, it deserves public acknowledgement and discussion.

VI. Conclusion

The adoption of Express Entry has given IRCC the most adaptable tool the ministry has ever possessed to manage and finetune the admission of economic immigrants to Canada, and one that reconciles many of the policy challenges that plagued earlier selection systems. Early indications suggest that Express Entry is delivering on its promise to provide a system for a digital age. Already, its parameters have been adjusted multiple times based upon real-time feedback, and the system could accommodate a wide variety of future changes. It is hard to imagine a return to the simpler scheme that preceded Express Entry, given that the new system enables officials to do so much while at the same time depoliticizing much of their work. However, while this depoliticization is attractive in many ways, it also presents a risk that immigration policy will become detached from the public it is meant to serve. It is important to build new forms of communication that will forge better public understanding and advance a richer discussion of economic immigration and its impact on Canada. This process might include sustained efforts to explain how Express Entry works and why the flexibility inherent in the system is necessary.

One potential way forward might be based on the wealth of immigration data that has been built up thanks to partnerships among IRCC, Statistics Canada, and the Canada Revenue Agency. The first data on the settlement and integration outcomes of immigrants admitted to Canada through the Express Entry system will become available in the next year or two. Presumably, the new data will show positive results and, if so, would provide an important opportunity for IRCC to educate Canadians on how admission programs work and why they are effective. In the meantime, IRCC would do well to prepare the way for this form of communication by building clear and compelling narratives about Express Entry that, in effect, create a stakeholder community.

⁴⁹ This point was astutely made by a senior IRCC official in a private discussion with the author in May 2018. The official noted that IRCC receives almost instant feedback when Canada's border policies, refugee policies, or policies on family reunification are revised, but the same cannot be said for Express Entry, which elicits little, if any, public response.



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