

# Strengths and Weaknesses of Canadian Express Entry System: Experts' Perceptions

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*This article offers an analysis of the first four years of functioning of Express Entry, a new on-line application management system to select skilled entrants for Canada's key economic immigration programs leading to permanent residence. Based on interviews with 20 experts on Canadian immigration policies, we identified a number of strengths and weaknesses of the Canadian Express Entry system related to four areas: immigration policy making, processing of applications, selection of immigrants, and retention of immigrants. Since these areas are integral parts of immigration policies in all countries and Canada is a long-term leader in the design of points-based systems for selection of skilled immigrants, we also specify several lessons from the Canadian experience with the Express Entry system for other countries seeking to attract skilled immigrants.*

## Introduction

The global competition for talent has intensified in the past two decades, with more and more states declaring an explicit interest in attracting skilled immigrants and drafting skill selective immigration policies to fulfill their economic and demographic needs (Czaika and Haas 2013; Kapur and McHale 2005). This has led to the proliferation of policies aimed at raising the levels of immigration of high-skilled workers. According to the UN Population Division (2017), the proportion of states with high-skilled immigration policies doubled between 2005 and 2015, rising from 22 percent to 44 percent.

For more than half a century, Canada has been among the vanguards of this global trend of developing human-capital oriented immigration schemes. It introduced the first points-based system to select skilled immigrants as early as 1967. Although the points system has been adjusted

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several times since due to both economic and demographic challenges, it remains in place until today. In this article, we focus on Express Entry, the most recent online and fully electronic application management system to select skilled migrants for Canada's economic immigration programs leading to permanent residence. Specifically, we analyzed the functioning of Express Entry since its introduction in January 2015 in order to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What were the prime strengths and weaknesses of the Express Entry system during the first four years of its existence?
- (2) What lessons can be learned from the first four years of the Express Entry system for other states' immigration policies?

While recognizing that national immigration systems are shaped by each country's particular geography, history, governance philosophy, and social and economic context, we argue that the Canadian experience is worthy of policymakers' attention worldwide for at least three reasons. First, understanding how other countries address immigration issues may spark ideas that could be of value. For its part, Canada has learned from studying the immigration systems of other countries (New Zealand and Australia in particular) prior to the introduction of Express Entry. Second, Canada's immigration system is widely considered among the best in the world and elements of it have already been emulated with variation in many countries, including Australia, Austria, Brazil, China, Denmark, India, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (Hooper and Desiderio 2016, 5). Third, albeit national contexts may differ, Canada faces two challenges common to a growing number of countries worldwide: (1) decline of the working-age population and (2) inadequate supply of skilled workers in key sectors of the economy.

Since Express Entry is a relatively new system, only a few policy-oriented think tank reports related to the system's functioning have been published thus far (two by former Canadian immigration officials and one by analysts at the US-based Migration Policy Institute (see Hiebert 2019; Hooper and Desiderio 2016; Vineberg 2019)). Because expert judgment is invaluable for assessing systems for which measurements or test results are sparse or nonexistent (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009; Meyer and Booker 1987), we employed a qualitative research approach focusing on experts' perceptions to produce the first explorative study identifying major strengths and challenges of Express Entry, as well as lessons for other countries. Specifically, we conducted in-depth semistructured interviews with 20 experts on Canadian immigration policy representing the government (both federal and provincial levels), major think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, the private sector, and academia. Table 1 provides an overview of our respondents and the codes assigned to them. Nine respondents

**TABLE 1 Respondents**

| Code | Expertise                       | Sector            | Position                  |
|------|---------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| C01  | Migration                       | Academic          | Assistant professor       |
| C02  | Migration system                | Private           | Journalist and researcher |
| C03  | Migration, policy, statistics   | Academic          | Associate professor       |
| C04  | Migration, history of migration | Nonprofit         | Research associate        |
| C05  | Migration policy                | Academic          | Professor                 |
| C06  | Migration system                | Academic          | Professor                 |
| C07  | Immigration policy              | Private           | Director                  |
| C08  | Immigration policy              | Academic          | Adjunct professor         |
| C09  | Migration                       | Academic          | Head of center            |
| C10  | Migration, integration          | Public-provincial | Director                  |
| C11  | Migration, human rights law     | Academic          | Professor                 |
| C12  | Migration, integration          | Public-provincial | Team leader               |
| C13  | Migration system                | Nonprofit         | Project coordinator       |
| C14  | Immigration policy              | Nonprofit         | Associate policy analyst  |
| C15  | Migration system                | Public-federal    | Assistant director        |
| C16  | Migration system                | Public-federal    | Assistant director        |
| C17  | Migration system                | Public-federal    | Director                  |
| C18  | Migration system                | Nonprofit         | Fellow                    |
| C19  | Migration system                | Nonprofit         | Senior fellow             |
| C20  | Migration system                | Academic          | Researcher                |

were male and 11 were female. The interviews were conducted between February and June 2019, either in person or over Skype. We guaranteed anonymity to all respondents. To code and analyze the interview transcripts, we used the Atlas.ti software as a tool for creating categories of strengths and challenges of Express Entry and exploring relations among them.

Although the number of our respondents is relatively small, their opinions capture the variety of perspectives regarding both the specifics of Express Entry and the broader Canadian migration policy context in which it operates. In both cases, this study offers the first comprehensive overview going well beyond the ground already covered in the few existing policy reports on Express Entry, which focus only on the system's shortcomings. However, because our discussion is primarily based on data from our experts' survey, we are not able to comment on the empirical validity of the strengths and challenges mentioned by our respondents. Although the opinions of all our respondents reflect years-, and in several cases, decades-long professional experience with Canadian migration policies; further qualitative and quantitative research is necessary to test their relevance in the long run. As such, this explorative study sets the agenda for such future research.

The structure of the article is as follows: First, we provide a concise overview of the evolution of the Canadian immigration system before the introduction of the Express Entry system. In the following two sections, we

present Express Entry and the adjustments in the system since its introduction, respectively. We then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Express Entry in the first four years of its functioning, primarily based on the data from our experts' survey. Afterward, we identify lessons learned from Express Entry for other countries seeking to attract skilled immigrants. In the concluding section, we summarize and discuss our findings.

## **Overview of the Canadian Immigration System prior to Express Entry**

Express Entry replaced the previous first-come, first-served immigration management system. But in many respects, it represents an evolution from the world's first points system to select immigrants introduced in Canada in 1967 (Green and Green 2004). From the very beginning, this system was designed to assess the likelihood that an applicant would be able to succeed in the Canadian labor market by assigning points based on criteria which focused on their human capital, immediate employment prospects, and personal circumstances (Kelley and Trebilcock 2010). These original criteria were largely maintained until the late 1980s, when Canada substantially raised its annual targets for permanent immigration due to both economic and demographic concerns (Hiebert 2019, 2) and stopped changing the admission levels in relation to the economic cycle (Green and Green 2004).

The substantial and permanent increase in demand for immigrants was met with an increase in submitted applications, which over time overwhelmed the system predicated on a straightforward logic of processing applications in the order in which they were submitted. This revealed a fundamental administrative difficulty—there was no mechanism to prioritize applications or to reject them without processing each to completion, which in turn severely limited the ability to select immigrants with human capital that would match the evolving needs of the Canadian economy. Moreover, despite some adjustments and automation efforts, the processing capacity was limited by the 1960s design of the system—applications were submitted by mail and processed manually as the paperwork moved through the admission system. As a consequence, by the 2000s, large backlogs developed, and years-long processing times became the standard. At the time just before the introduction of Express Entry, the average processing time was 12 to 14 months, while backlogs had reached up to six years (Hooper and Desiderio 2016, 11; Green and Green 2004, 282).

Employers, therefore, began to press the government to allow in higher numbers of temporary labor migrants and to ease admission procedures for these new migrants. The government responded to these requests with the rapid expansion of the employer-sponsored Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), especially during the economic recovery that

followed the 2007–2008 recession (Prokopenko and Hou 2018). However, while TFWP helped to fill labor shortages at various skill levels with flexibility and timeliness not matched by the permanent migration programs, concerns emerged that many employers (ab-)used the program “as an immigrant recruitment model rather than to meet temporary shortages” (Hooper and Desiderio 2016, 9) and that the temporary foreign workers were exploited (Ferrer, Picot, and Riddell 2014, 856). At the same time, several research studies have revealed that immigrants admitted since the 1990s had been slower to reach average Canadian income levels than had been the case a generation earlier, mostly due to experiencing greater difficulty finding jobs that corresponded to their level of education, lack of Canadian work experience, and language barriers (Hooper and Desiderio 2016, 7; Vineberg 2019, 7).

In response to the difficulties mentioned above, which also fueled the public perception that the permanent immigration system was in disrepair (Hiebert 2019, 3), the Canadian government followed the lead of New Zealand and Australia and introduced a new two-stage “by-invitation” model for selecting permanent economic immigrants to balance the short-term needs of local labor markets with longer-term socioeconomic goals. Overall, it is possible to conclude that the introduction of Express Entry in January 2015 marked a new era in the long history of Canada’s immigration policy, which has been defined by an ongoing battle between proponents of using immigration for long-term (economic growth and demographic) goals and proponents of using it for short-term (current labor market) goals (Green and Green 2004).

## Express Entry

On January 1, 2015, Canada launched Express Entry, a new online and fully electronic application management system to select prospective economic migrants for its economic immigration programs leading to permanent residence:

- (1) Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP) for high/er skilled workers with high human capital and work experience, in terms of applications the most important program.
- (2) Federal Skilled Trades Program (FSTP) for experienced but low/er skilled workers with correspondingly lower human capital, a relatively rarely used program (only two program-specific draws since 2015).
- (3) Canadian Experience Class (CEC) for applicants who have already gained skilled work experience in Canada on a temporary basis and for applicants with Canadian educational experience.
- (4) A portion of the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) which allows Canada’s provinces and territories to also recruit economic migrants.

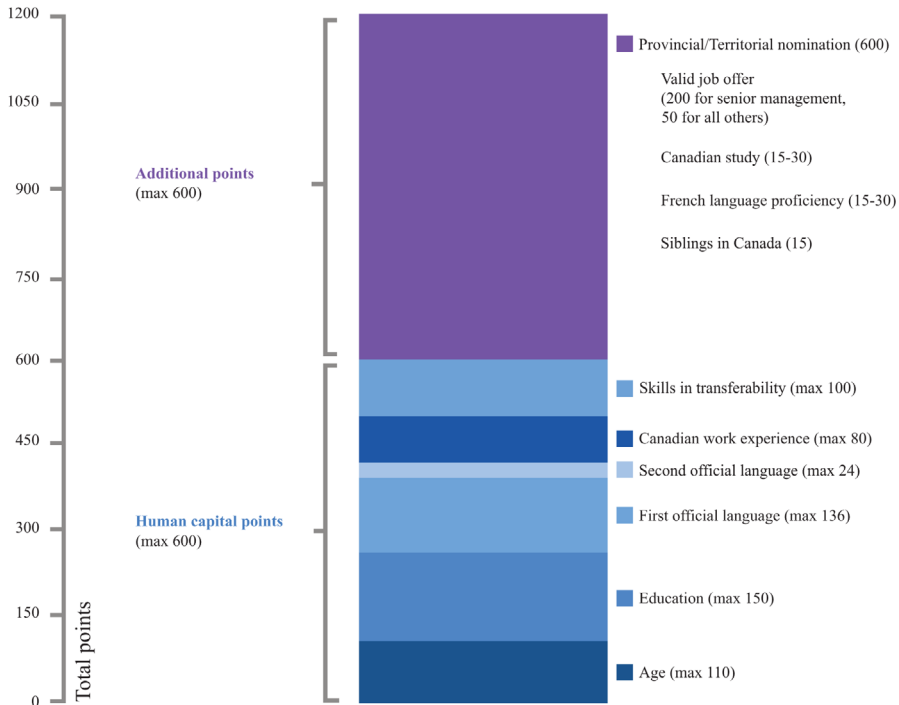
The first three economic immigration programs have accounted for approximately 60 percent of immigration to Canada over the last decade. In 2018, Canada welcomed about 186,355 new permanent residents through these programs (out of a total of 321,120 admissions), of which 92,235 were selected and invited via Express Entry (Joshi-Koop 2019). The other 40 percent of permanent immigrants to Canada were family reunifications and refugees, who are not administered via economic immigration programs. While this article does not deal with these categories of immigration, it is important to note that Canada's permanent migration system has three components (officially referred to as "classes") and the economic class is just one of them.

Moreover, it is also important to note that not all permanent economic immigration to Canada is managed via Express Entry and the system is not used to select temporary economic migrants. Regarding the latter, Canada has other immigration programs for this category, especially the TFWP and the International Mobility Program (Hooper and Desiderio 2016). Regarding the former, permanent economic migrants can also enter Canada via the PNP, which was created in 1998 to allow provincial governments to select economic immigrants to meet the unique needs of their local labor markets. In 2019, there were more than 60 streams of the PNP, with considerable variation in the selection criteria across the different provinces. Many PNP streams operate outside of the Express Entry system, albeit most provinces have indicated that they intend to invite more candidates under Express Entry in the future (Liebig 2016, 24). This, however, does not apply to Quebec. Since the signing of the Canada-Quebec Accord in 1991, all those who wish to immigrate to Quebec must apply exclusively through the Quebec provincial programs, which are not processed via Express Entry.

Express Entry is an invitation-based system prioritizing skilled immigrants who are most likely to succeed economically. To ensure the selection of the most suitable permanent economic immigrants, Express Entry consists of two steps. In the first step, potential immigrants express their interest in coming to Canada by creating an online profile and providing information about their skills, work experience, language ability, education, and other details. Based on this initial information, the online system automatically determines whether the person is eligible to apply under Express Entry, that is, whether s/he meets the minimum entry criteria (related to work experience, language skills, and education) of at least one of three federal economic immigration programs or PNP subject to Express Entry.

However, in contrast to the previous immigration system, meeting the minimum criteria does not guarantee the right to immigrate to Canada. Instead, potential immigrants who successfully make it through the initial screens enter into an Express Entry pool, where they are ranked vis-a-vis

**FIGURE 1 Visualization of the Comprehensive Ranking System Criteria (March 2019)**



SOURCE: (Joshi-Koop 2019)

all other prospective immigrants who are already in the pool. To determine their place in the pool, a Comprehensive Ranking System is used to assign points to candidates reflecting factors that are empirically shown to contribute to better wage outcomes and integration of immigrants:

- Up to 600 points for human capital factors most closely linked to economic outcomes (immigrant employment earnings), for example, education, language, work experience.
- Up to 600 points for additional policy and political considerations, including a provincial nomination, formal job offer, and other factors.

The Comprehensive Ranking System also automatically considers the interaction effects of certain factors (e.g., strong language skills and a post-secondary degree). The current specific breakdown of the points awarded for different factors under the Comprehensive Ranking System is always publicly available online at the webpage of the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC 2019b). (For a visualization of the points' breakdown as of March 2019, see Figure 1.)

The specific points allocation for each factor in the Comprehensive Ranking System can be adjusted flexibly at any time to ensure that desired migration targets are met with migrants with suitable skills. This is because significant policy changes in the field of immigration in Canada, including Express Entry, can be made through ministerial instructions by the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada that have received cabinet approval and do not require debate or approval in Parliament (Green and Green 1999). As discussed in the following sections, this administrative flexibility to alter selection criteria has already been used several times since January 2015, with important implications for the overall numbers and profiles of immigrants selected via Express Entry.

In the second step, only applicants with the highest rankings in the Express Entry pool are invited to apply for permanent residence in Canada during rounds of invitations that occur approximately every two weeks (IRCC 2019a). A crucial part of managing the system is determining the number of Invitations to Apply that will be issued each round, not the minimum Comprehensive Ranking System score. Several key factors affect the lowest score of a particular round (between 439 and 456 points in 2018). These include:

- The size of the round (in 2018, 89,800 invitations issued, with an average of 3,326 invitations per round).
- The number of candidates with bonus points (job offers, provincial nominations, those with Canadian education experience). In 2018, 57 percent of invited candidates qualified for one or more bonus point types.
- The composition of the pool at the time of a particular round (at the end of 2018, there were 97,612 active candidates in the pool) (Joshi-Koop 2019).

Invitation rounds can be for a specific immigration program (i.e., only for top-ranked applicants in that program) or merely the top-ranked applicants in the pool overall. This specification is a crucial factor because lower-skilled applicants are only likely to be selected in the very little-used program-specific draws for the FSTP program. Invitation rounds occur at a frequency and in numbers that align with the Immigration Levels Plan, which is presented for three years, but annual updates must be presented by the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to the parliament (IRCC 2018c).

Candidates who receive an Invitation to Apply have 60 days to submit an online application for permanent residence. They must provide evidence supporting the information in their online profile (e.g., identity, language proficiency, education, work experience, medical exam, proof of funds, for details see IRCC 2018a) and pay the processing (CAD 550) and permanent residence (CAD 490) fees for adult applicants and 150 CAD for a child



application (IRCC 2018b). For all selected applicants, an officer from the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada reviews the application and, after the verification of all documents and admissibility review,<sup>1</sup> rejects or approves the application. The overall processing time should be six months or less upon invitation (Joshi-Koop 2019).

Selected applicants have access to a range of free in-person and online services that should prepare them to adjust to life in Canada, both before and after arrival (including connection with employers and help with obtaining the required assessments of education credentials, work experience, and professional licenses/certificates, all paid for by the applicants (IRCC 2016). Upon arrival, all immigrants selected via Express Entry (including their spouses and children) are granted permanent residence in Canada, providing the immigrants with the same rights and benefits as Canadian citizens, except for the right to vote. Moreover, they are also eligible to apply for Canadian citizenship after meeting specific requirements.<sup>2</sup>

All online Express Entry profiles are valid for one year only, but candidates who do not receive an Invitation to Apply for permanent residence after 12 months (i.e., those whose points score is too low) can resubmit their profile and reenter the Express Entry pool if they still meet the minimum criteria. Candidates with scores high enough to receive the invitation to apply, who for some reason decline to apply, are returned to the Express Entry pool. Candidates with scores high enough to receive the invitation to apply, who for some reason neither apply nor decline, must submit a new Express Entry profile (IRCC 2015).

## Changes in Express Entry since its introduction

Since Express Entry's introduction in January 2015, there have already been several changes in the points allocation, which primarily reflect the aforementioned long-term debate whether to prioritize applicants with formal job offers (i.e., short-term labor market needs) or those with high human capital but without a job offer before arrival to Canada (i.e., longer-term economic growth and demographic goals).

Originally, the Comprehensive Ranking System of Express Entry was designed to respond to employer demands (C03) as it required all but the best candidates to have approved job offers and 600 of the 1,200 available points were allocated to having a job. This focus on jobs resulted in large numbers of people with job offers in midrange skills (e.g., restaurant supervisors and cooks, many already working in Canada under the TFWP) being accepted, and only about 40 percent selected based on their human capital (C03). Moreover, within a few months, once the pool of applicants who were already working in Canada had been depleted, the number of prospective applicants with a job offer was too low to meet Canada's annual targets for permanent economic immigration (Hiebert 2019, 7).

In response, in the fall of 2016, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada changed the Comprehensive Ranking System by lowering the maximum points allocated for a job from 600 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 management positions. To benefit from the additional points, the job offer must be supported by a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA), which attests that the job cannot be filled with Canadians or permanent residents. Candidates with a positive LMIA provide this information in their Express Entry profile. Once in Canada and thus with permanent residency, the spouses and children of selected Express Entry applicants can take any jobs without an LMIA (C08). Since November 2016, the Comprehensive Ranking System awards points for Canadian study (15–30 points). Since June 2017, points are also awarded for French language skills (15–30 points) and to candidates with a sibling in Canada (Joshi-Koop 2019).

Since June 2017, candidates without prior job offers in Canada are no longer required to register in an official Job Bank, an online employment matching tool maintained by the Government of Canada (DESDC n.d.). Initially, candidates lacking employer or provincial sponsorship at the moment of filing the Express Entry profile had 30 days to register with the Job Bank, or else their profile would be withdrawn. Registration is now optional, a reflection of mixed results of the actual usefulness of the Job Bank for both employers and migrants during the first two and half years of Express Entry (C03).

Overall, the changes mentioned above can be summarized as a prioritization of human capital skills over job offers, the former being more important for longer-term economic growth and integration of immigrants to Canada (C03). According to one of our respondents (C09), the changes have also transformed the composition of immigrants selected to come to Canada, who now tend to be overall younger (in their 20s or 30s), more educated (university graduates), and “about half of them now seem to be female.”

## Strengths and weaknesses of Express Entry

Since Express Entry is a relatively new system, it is still too early to draw any definitive conclusions about its functioning. This section, therefore, provides an initial overview of experts' perspectives regarding key strengths and weaknesses identified during the first years of Express Entry. When it comes to the weaknesses, this overview is complemented with two additional perspectives derived solely from previously published policy reports (concerning administrative depoliticization and retention and integration of immigrants), which are listed below as the last two weaknesses for easy identification. In the case of six weaknesses (low numbers of high-scoring

applicants, too much focus on principle applicants, technology-driven selection, and complexity), the perspectives of our respondents further expanded the critical insights from previously published reports. The remaining nine weaknesses and all strengths discussed in this section are exclusively based on the data from our experts' survey.

## Strengths

*Shortening of processing time.* Express Entry was introduced to remedy some of the shortcomings of the previous immigration system; in particular, the long processing times and related backlogs of unprocessed applications, including those whose work was acutely needed in some provinces (C10). The new two-step design of Express Entry effectively remedied both problems, with processing times of six months or less upon invitation (C01, C04, C15, C16, C19).

*Meeting regional labor market demands and demographic needs.* According to our respondents, speeding up the processing time of the application procedure as well as increasing selectivity helps employers and provincial governments in more efficient fulfillment of labor market demands: "I think there is also a lot of value from moving from the first-come, first-served to a little more targeted approach based on the needs and labor market desires of the different governing bodies" (C04). For Canadian businesses and employers, Express Entry offers a more direct role in economic immigration, although this role was arguably even more substantial before June 2016 when job offers were a de facto precondition for selection (C01, C02). The system also helps to save time and money in the process of matching candidates to jobs, a benefit of particular value to small- and medium- sized enterprises, which in general struggle to manage the very resource-intensive process of screening and hiring foreign candidates (C03). Overall, Express Entry should help to improve Canada's position in the growing global competition for talent (C04, C15, C19). Moreover, by allowing family migration (principal applicants can bring their nuclear family members with them), Express Entry contributes towards meeting diverse demographic needs both on federal and provincial levels (C01, C04, C08), reflecting the Canadian conception of immigration as a nation-building tool.

*Strengthening of the role of provinces in the federal immigration policy.* The inclusion of Provincial Nomination Programs under Express Entry helps to target diverging local labor market needs and thus also bring a fairer share of the benefits of immigration across the country:

What's really making Canada's immigration policy successful, in my view, is first: Provincial Nomination Programs. So, if you look over time at the

number of permanent residents admitted to Canada as skilled workers, a higher and higher proportion are coming as provincial nominees. And this solves the problem because many employers at the provincial level can use the system to bring in the people they need. (C05, similar statements C01, C04, C19)

*Flexibility of selection criteria and volume management.* Express Entry is very flexible in terms of changes in the criteria for the selection of immigrants, thus allowing for swift adjustments to the ever-changing labor market needs. Since Express Entry does not require any occupation lists or caps, the government also does not need to do what it was never good at doing—predicting specific market needs (C03, C04 C06, C09):

It made the new system more flexible; it allowed the government to eventually eradicate the oversubscription to the program [...] And it allows the government to pick very precisely exactly the individuals that are applying that appear to be the most useful to the Canadian labor market situation at a given time. The criteria can be changed very rapidly, as the labor market changes. So that flexibility, I think, has been very much appreciated by the policy and political system. (C06)

Moreover, the system allows relatively easy regulation of the number of admitted immigrants over time: “The thing about Express Entry is it’s tap off, tap on. That’s the efficiency piece” (C10, similar statements C09, C12, C19).

*Increasing selectivity.* Express Entry prioritizes the selection of the “best and brightest” over the “first-come, first-served” principle (C08, C12, C15). The key element for increasing selectivity was the introduction of competition into the system: “You must meet minimum criteria and then, once you are in the pool, you are ranked against all your other competitors” (C10). Moreover, the requirement for education and language credentials also seems to enhance the selectivity of the system. According to one respondent from the academic sector (C03), preliminary research findings suggest

that immigrants who had to have their credentials assessed were actually better off in wages one year later than those who came in, let’s say 2012 when they didn’t require that.” While the data are still to be collected, which is now easier than ever before due to full digitalization of Express Entry, there is also an expectation that improved selection of permanent economic migrants will lead to better integration as well as economic outcomes. (C08, C09, C12, C15, C16, C19)

*Transparency.* From the perspective of (potential) immigrants to Canada, Express Entry offers a transparent online system with clearly stated selection criteria (C10, C12, C14, C19). It also allows the applicants to check and improve their current points online anytime (C10, C14). Applicants may be eligible for more than one migration program without the need to

fill out multiple applications, and they have multiple opportunities to be invited to apply for permanent residency in Canada throughout the year. While the CAD 1,040 processing and permanent residence fee is relatively high (C03), it has to be paid only by the already-selected applicants. The creation of an Express Entry online profile is free for everyone. Potential candidates are also not required to hire an immigration representative to participate in Express Entry. Similarly, as of mid-2019, job offers and provincial nominations are an asset, but not a requirement. From the perspective of Canadian policymakers, built-in online transparency also increases the resistance of Express Entry to major changes due to political shifts in the federal government, which have already happened since its introduction in 2015: “Once the point system was introduced, it gave the minister a lot of protection (...) He can say: ‘Everyone applied to the same criteria objectively, there is no discrimination in the system.’ That made it much easier for the policy to be defended as objective and principle-driven” (C19).

*Pathway from temporary to permanent immigration.* The Canadian Experience Class component of Express Entry facilitates the transition from temporary to permanent residence for high-skilled workers and international students (C03, C05, C10, C14). Especially international students are now an essential target for the Canadian immigration policy, with several provinces being very active in attracting international students and creating measures to retain them (C03, C05, C09). Almost half of all invitations are issued for applicants already residing in Canada—49 percent in 2017, 45 percent in 2018 (IRCC 2019a, 11). Several experts also argued that Express Entry can provide a pathway to permanent residence for temporary migrants by introducing a “probation period” for both employers and immigrants (C03, C14).

## Weaknesses

*Too much power in the hands of the federal government.* Several respondents argued that the Ministerial instructions provide the federal government with too much power when it comes to determining the selection criteria and determining the numbers and programs for each draw. They, therefore, suggested that the ministerial authority should be constrained, for example, by adding more parliamentary oversight to the system (C08, C11, C19). High federal governmental autonomy in the management of Express Entry also exacerbates historical tensions between the federal and provincial governments: “The provinces always feel that the federal government does not do an adequate job of consulting and providing full transparency on policies and programs” (C08).

*Caps imposed on the number of provincial nominees.* Although income data and the Canadian federal government’s evaluations demonstrate that the

PNP is very successful, caps on the numbers of provincial nominees remain in place (C05). As pointed out by one of the academic experts (C08):

The federal government still controls very tightly how many slots of the Express Entry pool will be allocated for provincial nominees. And some provinces are very unhappy about the numbers allocated to them under the provincial nominee program, either in the parallel PNP, where the provinces have much more control over the criteria, or the Express Entry PNP, where all of them still have to meet the federal criteria for one of the programs.

*Verification of credentials and real skills of immigrants.* Like all other economic migration selection systems, Express Entry faces a significant challenge when it comes to the potential gap between “theoretical” and “real” skills, or what one of our respondents (C05) referred to as “the disconnect between the potential of immigrants to succeed and their actual success.” An important part of this challenge is credentials verification, which goes beyond checking the validity of foreign credentials (e.g., degrees, diplomas, language certificates, licenses for regulated jobs, but also work experience) and verifying their equivalence to Canadian secondary, postsecondary, and other qualifications.<sup>3</sup> Many occupations require specific certifications and qualifications (doctors, teachers, electricians) and there are different accreditation and certification standards in different Canadian provinces (C01, C03, C05). There is also some evidence of protectionism on behalf of the provincial Canadian licensing associations, “making it too difficult for internationally trained applicants to qualify” (C05). Most of the offers of employment under Express Entry are, therefore, in unregulated professions, such as IT specialists, software specialists, and managers of various descriptions (C05). In contrast, many educated immigrants in regulated professions who arrive in Canada without a commensurate job offer tend to contribute to brain waste since they have to take on unlicensed jobs, at times for many years (C08, C09).

*Long-distance hiring.* One of the aims of Express Entry was to improve the selection of immigrants using the Job Bank. However, employers did not use the Job Bank extensively, which contributed to the substantial cut in the number of points awarded for having a job offer (C03, C05, C09, C12) and reorientation of Express Entry “from being job-driven to being more human capital-driven” (C09). Thus, most of the immigrants coming through Express Entry nowadays do not have a job offer upon their arrival to Canada (C05). In 2018, only 10 percent of invited applicants claimed additional points for arranged employment (IRCC 2019a, 14). The main challenge is how to convince employers to hire internationally despite all the technology available.

How do you, over thousands of kilometers, match an employer, who is looking for someone with a certain skill set and qualifications, with someone who can

potentially fill the job? That's what Express Entry is supposed to do, yet despite the digitalization and the existence of a government-run Job Bank, it doesn't seem to work as well as intended. (C05)

*De facto long waiting time for applicants with lower scores.* Although the 12 month maximum period to remain in the Express Entry pool is not an official backlog and candidates can reapply every 12 months, for most prospective immigrants with low scores assigned by the Comprehensive Ranking System, the long waiting times continue to exist: "There's no backlog because you basically don't get the privilege of applying until you're invited. So it looks like there is no waiting list of people, but of course there is. All those people that put in the intention to apply are still waiting" (C03, also C12).

*Exploitation of temporary workers.* In combination with the proliferation of temporary migration schemes, which are not administered via Express Entry, some respondents were critical of the two-step immigration system for lacking the protection of workers with temporary residence permits against exploitation (C03, C08). One respondent also suggested that the Canadian Experience Class should not be processed through Express Entry but through a separate stream (C19). Although it can facilitate the transition from temporary to permanent residence for high-skilled workers and international students, it also has negative implications for them and the families they leave behind. Moreover, Canadian study experience is also not enough for successful integration of immigrants: "It's not studying here, that matters, it's working and getting a good quality job here, while studying" (C03).

*Dispersal challenge.* Although this challenge goes beyond the functioning of Express Entry, it was explicitly raised by several respondents who noted that there has been a "dispersal problem" in that most immigrants would land in Toronto and other big cities and not really move to the rest of Canada: "It used to be that the big three (MTV—Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver) got 70 percent of all immigrants. That's down, it's closer to 60 percent now or even a little bit less in terms of arrivals. But if you take the top ten cities in Canada, it's still well over 80 percent of all immigrants" (C09, also C01, C13, C14). The regional imbalances are further exacerbated by the fact that, once immigrants land in Canada and become permanent residents, they have full mobility rights and cannot be forced to stay in any city or province. Thus, although immigrants may be recruited via a provincial nomination, they are not obliged to stay in the province that issued the nomination (C08, C11).

*Low numbers of high-scoring applicants.* Ever since the reduction of points for job offers, there has been a shortage of applicants with high scores (C01, C03, C08). According to one of our respondents (C05), "from what

the program was supposed to accomplish, the proportion of those who are admitted solely on the basis of 450 or 500 points, meaning no job offer, is much higher than intended." More specifically, as noted by Hiebert (2019, 8):

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. 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.

With such low numbers of applicants with high scores, the Express Entry system is extremely dependent on a steady supply of new online applications and their rapid rate of their processing by the Canadian government when it comes to meeting the increased annual migration targets. But it is also possible that the point thresholds in some selection rounds may need to be lowered again, which implies the admission of applicants with relatively low levels of human capital.

*Too much focus on principle applicants and neglect of their dependents.* Although 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, the selection criteria concentrate more or less exclusively on the characteristics of an individual person, the principal applicant (Hiebert 2019, 11). This is problematic because most applications under Express Entry are joint—in 2015, for example, slightly less than half of those entering the skilled worker category were principal applicants. Thus, as pointed out by Sweetman as well as the experts in our research (C05, C08), although Canada's immigration policy is known for its points system, only about 11 percent of all immigrants, or just under 18 percent of all economic class immigrants, were adjudicated by it in 2015 (Sweetman 2017, 281). Moreover, research has also revealed "a large gap between the economic outcomes of principal applicants to Canada's economic programs and those of their spouses or partners" (Hiebert 2019, 10), which is a major challenge for integration of families selected through Express Entry.

*Technology-driven selection.* As pointed out by Hiebert 2019 (10), one has to keep in mind that while "hard" skills (e.g., 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.” Some former Canadian immigration officers (Vineberg 2019, 10), as well as some of our respondents (C03, C06, C20), are therefore also critical of the fully digital nature of Express Entry, which means that immigration officers do not interview any applicants<sup>4</sup> and the system depends entirely on the so-called “perfected application” submitted online:

I believe that immigration has to do not just with workers, but with people, all of whom are individual and many of whom do not fit exactly into the carefully crafted categories of the immigration legislation. There needs to be the opportunity in the selection process to assess the real person, not just the version represented in a paper or electronic immigration application. (...) I strongly believe that this assessment can only be done in person, by a skilled immigration officer. (Vineberg 2019, 10)

*Complexity.* By creating a two-step system and a second points system, which is nonetheless mostly comparable with the one used to assess eligibility for the Federal Skilled Worker program, Express Entry has added further complexity (Liebig 2016, 15). This may be an unintended consequence of the adjustments of Express Entry criteria since its introduction—as Canadian policymakers have attempted to flexibly respond to changing priorities (short-term demand-driven versus longer-term human-capital skills-oriented immigration), the system has become more difficult to navigate for both prospective immigrants and employers (Hooper and Papademetriou 2019, 12). This is problematic because it is crucial “whether employers can navigate the system easily and whether immigrants or prospective migrants understand how the process works and whether the system produces predictable results” (C14). Many applicants have therefore turned for help to lawyers and immigration consultants to draft a perfect application. This creates extra costs for these “assisted” applicants who are, moreover, not necessarily more likely to settle successfully in Canada (Vineberg 2019, 6).

*Administrative depoliticization.* Due to the complexities of the system and relative lack of media attention, the Canadian public has mostly disengaged from the topic of economic immigration. This is problematic because Express Entry now plays a crucial role in deciding the course of Canada’s economic future (Hiebert 2019, 1), and public support for immigration is a crucial aspect for the long-term success of the entire Canadian migration policy (C01, C19). Hiebert (2019, 13–14) therefore warns of the risk of “administrative depoliticization” related to the complexity of Express Entry—although the government provides numerous highly informative reports on Express Entry, with detailed statistics on the profiles of applicants, “this information can only be appreciated by those who already have some

understanding of selection policy and how the admission system functions." As a consequence, according to Hiebert, "Canadian media have barely noticed this rich field of information" and "even the larger changes made to Express Entry, such as downgrading the points assigned to a job offer, have largely gone unnoticed." He further adds that this is particularly worrisome "in an age of populist politics when policymakers are often portrayed as out-of-touch elites."

*A high number of ineligible applicants and declined invitations.* Although there is no indication that Express Entry has proven either too costly to operate efficiently or that it is unable to deliver the number of economic immigrants mandated by rising annual immigration targets, the available data from published reports points to several potential challenges. First, as noted by Hiebert (2019, 6), the ratio of ineligible profiles has been quite high. In 2016, for example, approximately 45 percent of the profiles submitted were rejected because they did not meet the requirements of any of Canada's admission categories. 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. Second, at least in the first year of Express Entry, there was a significant difference between the issued invitations (more than 28,000 in 2015) and actually submitted applications (slightly fewer than 17,000 in 2015) for permanent residence (Hooper and Desiderio 2016, 13). This is even more striking considering that before the introduction of Express Entry, visa wastage was very low—only less than 2 percent of invited candidates did not land in Canada (Liebig 2016, 8). According to Hooper and Desiderio (2016, 13), one possible explanation is that the 60-day limit for applying for permanent residence after an invitation is issued under Express Entry is too short for candidates to fill all the supporting documentation required.

*Retention and integration.* The official immigration statistics presented above reflect entries to Canada, but not all entries are permanent since return and onward migration is an empirically important phenomenon. For example, a study of global labor markets by Aydemir and Robinson (2008) found that around 25 percent of male immigrants 25–35 years old upon arrival are likely to exit within five years, with about 35 percent leaving within 20 years. Thus, as noted by Hooper and Papademetriou (2019, 2), "as more countries enter the competition for talent, governments will need to look beyond how they select immigrant workers to think about how they retain them." While issues of retention and integration of immigrants

go beyond Express Entry, which is designed to select immigrants, it is clear policymakers need to think carefully about what will give their country the edge when it comes to both attracting and retaining the best and brightest immigrants. In the Canadian context, as noted above, permanent residency gives all Express Entry immigrants access to the same public benefits and services as to native Canadians, except for the right to vote.

## Lessons learned

When it comes to lessons learned, it is important to note that context matters. This is not only apparent from the available literature, it was repeatedly emphasized by our respondents. Specifically, national immigration systems are shaped by each country's geography, history, governance philosophy, and social and economic context. In all these aspects, the Canadian context is unique. Canada's geography gives it greater control over its borders than is the case for many other nations. Canada has also historically relied on immigration as a demographic and nation-building tool (C03, C16). Migration is therefore considered part of the national heritage (Liebig 2016, 4), and since the 1960s, "the narrative of immigrants as nation builders has been an integral part of Canada's identity" (Hooper and Desiderio 2016, 5). As a nation built on immigration—one in five people in Canada were foreign-born in 2016, projected to rise to as high as 30 percent by 2036 (C16; also see Bélanger and Bastien 2013; Dion et al. 2015)—the population's culture differs even from that of other immigrant-receiving countries. In particular, Canadian society has a general broad-based comfort with relatively high levels of immigration (Sweetman 2017, 278). In fact, as stressed by all our Canadian respondents, the Canadian public is generally very positive, relative to other countries in the world, towards immigration: "Why is that? It is because the Canadian public sees that immigrants help Canada. Immigrants help the Canadian economy. Immigrants are good for Canada" (C03). Moreover, this discourse on the economic benefits of immigration has been utilized by all successive Canadian federal governments, which also continuously point out that immigration is a necessity from the demographic perspective, while simultaneously emphasizing that they keep firm control over immigration to Canada (C01).

Nevertheless, despite the uniqueness of the Canadian context, Canada's immigration policies can provide significant inspiration for other countries since most developed countries face similar predicaments when it comes to (1) efficiently matching candidates with job vacancies; (2) managing the very resource-intensive process of screening and hiring foreign candidates; and (3) addressing the multifaceted risk perceived by employers in recruiting such candidates given the limited information available on their skills, work experience, and qualifications (Hooper and Desiderio 2016, 2). Our research specifically points to the following six lessons

from the first years of the functioning of the Canadian Express Entry system worthy of consideration by policymakers worldwide when it comes to addressing these challenges.

First, the introduction of Express Entry in January 2015 did not happen overnight and it is not set to be the end-point of the process (C03, C14). As noted by Hooper and Desiderio (2016, 24), it is a “living system” whose features might evolve, driven by Canada’s commitment to the continuous fine-tuning of its migration policies. The Canadian experience indicates that this commitment, or perhaps even the very ability, to adjust the selection criteria relatively quickly stems from the concentration of most migration-related issues under a single ministry and the concentration of a lot of decision-making power within this ministry. This, however, is predicated on a general political consensus on critical aspects of the national immigration policy, which ensures its overall continuity even as the holders of key political positions within the immigration ministry change over time.

Second, Canada has an immigration ministry with a dedicated research and evaluation department tasked with the ongoing monitoring of how immigrants fare in the Canadian labor market and society and providing advice on needed policy adjustments. Furthermore, Canada has developed cutting-edge longitudinal datasets (The Longitudinal Immigration Database, IMDB; see Statistics Canada, Government of Canada 2018) and sophisticated surveys (Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, LSIC; see Statistics Canada, Government of Canada 2007) that track immigrants’ labor market integration in the long run, which highlights the importance of evidence-based policymaking in the management of immigration.

Third, Canada’s experience with Express Entry highlights the benefits of full digitalization of the immigration selection system where applications are submitted and evaluated online, where the communication between all relevant stakeholders is electronic, and where social media are harnessed to enable mass communication. This enhances transparency and limits the opportunities for corruption, which is a significant problem in many countries. Moreover, related to the previous lesson, all the data collected at every stage of the selection process can be used to facilitate research and evaluation of both intermediate and longer-term outcomes of migration policy (Hiebert 2019, 5).

Fourth, Canada puts significant efforts and resources into maintaining its reputation as an attractive country for immigration. Among these are recruitment fairs in crucial origin countries and the provision of both pre- and postimmigration integration services. This suggests that it is important not just to process the applications effectively and transparently, but also to actively search for, and then entice, the most suitable immigrants to both migrate and integrate to Canada. At the regional level, provinces increasingly play an important role in promoting Canada as an immigration destination, designing their own campaigns to attract immigrants.

Fifth, the family and refugee classes are considered essential and indispensable elements for the overall long-term functioning of the Canadian immigration policy. Similarly, although economic immigration includes a mix of temporary and permanent migration, the latter is considered crucial. Moreover, permanent economic migration not only leads to permanent residency immediately upon arrival, which gives immigrants access to all public benefits and services, but it also opens the way to Canadian citizenship after three years. Canada's experience, therefore, highlights the importance of developing a national migration policy that is both comprehensive and long-term oriented. A smooth transition from temporary to permanent immigration and family considerations are vital factors when it comes to attracting and retaining high-skilled immigrants.

Sixth, the Canadian experience speaks in favor of strengthening the role of the regional administrations in immigration policies when it comes to decisions regarding both the categories and quantities of migration matching regional needs. While the shift towards local policymaking in the area of immigrant integration has already occurred in many countries across Europe, immigration policies determining the admission of immigrants remains predominantly the national domain. But as Scholten and Penninx (2016, 97) argue, although subnational governments usually lack immigration policy competencies, they nevertheless have vested interests in shaping immigration policies to reflect their specific regional economy and demography contexts. Better calibrated regional approaches may also offer some remedies to the dispersal challenges, especially the concentration of immigrants to large cities.

## Conclusions

Our analysis identified several pertinent strengths and weaknesses of the Canadian Express Entry system related to one (or more) of the following four areas: (1) immigration policymaking, (2) processing applications, (3) selection of immigrants, and (4) retention of immigrants. Since these areas are integral parts of immigration policies in all countries and Canada is a long-term leader in the design of points-based systems for selection of skilled immigrants, the Canadian experience with the Express Entry system also offers many lessons to immigration policymakers and experts in other countries. (For visualization of these lessons, see Figure 2.)

When it comes to immigration policymaking, the decision-making arrangements authorizing the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to flexibly adjust the number of immigrants admitted and the criteria for their selection make the Express Entry system reasonably responsive to various policy, as well as political, considerations. At the same time, lack of public debate and parliamentary oversight of the Express Entry system creates the risk of administrative depoliticization and

**FIGURE 2 Strengths (Column 1) and Weaknesses (Column 2) of the Express Entry**



SOURCE: Authors.

disengagement of the public with the topic of economic immigration. It also causes tensions between the federal and the provincial governments as some of the provinces oppose the caps imposed on the provincial nominees by the federal government. Although the role of the provinces in

immigration policymaking has strengthened in the past years, they still demand more power in determining the number of immigrants coming through Express Entry to their regions.

When it comes to the processing of applications, shortening of the processing time of submitted applications to six months or less is one of the key benefits of Express Entry. At the same time, however, the two-step selection system created an invisible and potentially never-ending waiting line for applicants with lower scores. The online application process with a clearly defined number of points awarded for scoring on selected criteria makes the Express Entry system relatively transparent for potential immigrants and, therefore, also reasonably corruption resistant. However, being part of a complex immigration system with several interrelated immigration programs, Express Entry is not easy to navigate for both employers and prospective immigrants, who often seek paid assistance with the application process to maximize their chances for success.

When it comes to the selection of immigrants, Expressed Entry increases the likelihood of admitting immigrants best suited for success on the Canadian labor market by introducing competition into the selection process and requiring credentials' assessments. At the same time, a significant proportion of the immigrants arriving in Canada through Express Entry is spouses of the principal applicants, whose skills are not assessed via the points system. Moreover, it remains difficult to attract high scoring applicants, so the points' threshold for selection had to be lowered to meet the increased annual immigration targets. The lack of high-scoring candidates is also related to employers' reluctance to hire internationally because even in a fully digitalized selection process, the assessment of the real skills of immigrants, as opposed to those filled in on the online application, remains a significant challenge.

When it comes to retention of immigrants, their targeted selection, which considers both the current labor market and longer-term demographic needs, should increase the likelihood of their successful integration on local labor markets. However, a major persisting challenge is the brain waste. Both selected immigrants and their spouses still too often face obstacles related to the certification requirements in many regulated professions and the lack of trust by Canadian employers regarding foreign work experience even when they receive the Canadian licensure in their profession. Having experience working in Canada therefore substantially increases the chances for successful labor market integration of immigrants and Express Entry provides an important pathway to permanent residence to skilled immigrants and students who have come to Canada on a temporary visa. Nevertheless, the retention of high skilled immigrants in an increasingly mobile world remains a challenge even for a country built on immigration.

## Notes

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1 Applicants can be found inadmissible for several reasons, including security reasons, human or international rights violations, medical reasons, financial reasons, or misrepresentation (IRCC 2010).

2 Permanent residents are required to physically reside in Canada for 1,460 days in the six years immediately preceding the date of application for citizenship and 183 days during each of four calendar years within those six years. Other requirements include an English or French language test, a test of knowledge of Canada, an absence of crimi-

nal activity and appropriate tax-filing behavior (Sweetman 2017, 279).

3 Express Entry applicants must submit the results of a language test and, if they possess a foreign degree or certificate, an Educational Credential Assessment (ECA) that verifies the validity of the credential and its equivalence to a Canadian qualification. ECAs are carried out by third-party organizations designated by the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship (Hooper and Desiderio 2016, 10).

4 Oral selections interviews with all economic immigrants were conducted by Canadian immigration officers prior to the early 1990s, when they were abolished for cost-cutting reasons and to reduce the backlogs of applications.

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