



OECD report says Canada does well recruiting immigrant workers, except in the trades

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Canada should streamline its immigration system for skilled workers, let provinces create their own Temporary Foreign Worker programs and make it easier for people with international credentials to obtain Canadian equivalents, according to a new report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Recruiting Immigrant Workers, the report published by the OECD Tuesday, gave Canada's immigration system an overall positive review, praising its robust system for choosing which workers to admit, its prearrival supports and its ability to integrate and retain newcomers. It called Canada's system a "benchmark" for other countries and noted Canada had the highest share of highly educated foreign-born people in the OECD.

Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen told reporters in Toronto Tuesday he was "honoured" by the positive feedback, and that he'd study the recommendations for improvement.

The report suggested merging the immigration categories in Canada's Express Entry system. Created in 2015 by Stephen Harper's Conservative government, it was designed to better manage immigration applications from people with relevant job skills.

Candidates who meet the minimum criteria form a pool where they are assigned points in categories such as education, age and language proficiency. Every couple of weeks, the government invites the highest-scoring people to apply for permanent residency.

Express Entry immigrants can be in one of three streams: Federal Skilled Workers, Federal Skilled Trades or Canadian Experience Class (people who have already worked in Canada for at least one year). These classes were created before Express Entry was brought in.

The OECD recommended merging the Federal Skilled Workers class with the Canadian Experience Class, and differentiating candidates by awarding more points for Canadian work experience.

The agency also recommended abolishing the Federal Skilled Trades class because the program didn't reach the "desired group" of potential immigrants. In 2018, fewer than 400 applicants were admitted under this class, and many of them were cooks – an occupation that's not in high demand nationwide, the report noted.

Instead, it proposed creating a single set of criteria for entry into the pool and one consistent entry pathway.

But that idea worries Roxanne McInnis Jessome, an immigration consultant and founder of Vancouver-based Join Canada Immigration Specialists. She says the current points system already puts skilled tradespeople at a disadvantage, because expertise gained on the job isn't given the same weight as a postsecondary credential.

The result is that even though there's a shortage of skilled workers in construction in B.C., skilled tradespeople often don't get invited to apply for permanent residency.

"Don't abolish the trades [stream], manage it differently," she said.

Getting rid of the trades stream would mean “a very deep policy revision on how the Express Entry would work,” added Dory Jade, chief executive officer of the Canadian Association of Professional Immigration Consultants.

Canada should also let provinces and territories create their own Temporary Foreign Worker programs to target specific regional shortages, the OECD recommended.

It also took aim at the cumbersome process for immigrants to get their foreign credentials recognized in Canada. That’s often a provincial issue, Mr. Jade said, because licensing bodies often differ regionally.

The report recommended following the German model to set up a specific short-term visa for people to get the ball rolling on getting Canadian equivalents for their qualifications, since right now it’s not possible to start licensing for many occupations from outside of Canada.

Canadian employers also have to complete a document called a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) sometimes to show there’s a need for a foreign worker to fill a job. The OECD recommended abolishing LMIA for permanent migration in favour of integrity checks to verify the working conditions and wages.

Mr. Hussen said he recognized “that we have to do better there,” and is working to set up a trusted employer program, so that those looking to hire foreign workers don’t need to submit paperwork over and over again.

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