Ottawa looks to ease international students' path to permanent residency Add to ...

www.theglobeandmail.com//news/politics/ottawa-looks-to-ease-international-students-path-to-permanent-residency/article29242266/

MICHELLE ZILIO AND SIMONA CHIOSE

The Liberal government is moving to make it easier for international students to become permanent residents once they have graduated from Canadian postsecondary institutions.

Immigration Minister John McCallum said he intends to launch federal-provincial talks to reform the current Express Entry program, a computerized system that serves as a matchmaking service between employers and foreign skilled workers. Thousands of international students have been rejected for permanent residency because the program favours prospective skilled workers from abroad.

"We must do more to attract students to this country as permanent residents," Mr. McCallum told reporters after meeting with his provincial and territorial counterparts Monday. "International students have been shortchanged by the Express Entry system. They are the cream of the crop in terms of potential future Canadians and so I certainly would like to work with my provincial and territorial colleagues to improve that."

Mr. McCallum said international students are ideal immigrants and should be recruited by Canada.

"I believe international students are among the most fertile source of new immigrants for Canada. By definition, they are educated. They speak English or French," said the minister.

"They know something about the country, so they should be first on our list of people who we court to come to Canada," he minister.

International students have been uncertain about whether they will be able to stay in Canada after they finish their studies since the former Conservative government introduced the Express Entry system on Jan. 1, 2015. Prior to that, they had a clear path to permanent residency.

To be able to apply for permanent residence under Express Entry, however, graduates have to reach a certain number of points, with levels changing from month to month. Those with the highest points in any given month are more likely to be successful.

Evan Green, a Toronto immigration lawyer who has helped international students apply for permanent residence, was cautious about the promise to adjust how applications are processed.

The government is projecting fewer economic applicants overall, and so international students may face more competition for the available spots.

"The target for 2015 was 181,300 in the economic class and this year it's 160,600," he said.

Still, a few simple adjustments could make it easier for international students to settle in Canada, he said. Giving graduates specific points for education and work experience in this country would be a start. That's how the prior system worked.

"You had people who paid for their own education, had Canadian work experience, they're pretty good immigrants," he said. "They could adjust it so that work experience on your postgrad work permit could be worth more."

Making the system easier to navigate is crucial to Canada's economy and its universities, said Paul Davidson, the president of Universities Canada. International students contribute in excess of $10-billion in GDP to the economy, more than wheat and more than softwood lumber, he said.

"It's a global competition," he said. "Being able to offer a commitment that students can stay here after they graduate is part of the pitch Canadian universities make to attract top talent."

When the system was first introduced, people with a long work history in Canada were the first to receive invitations. That's because their employers were willing to file applications for a labour market impact assessment (LMIA). If the assessment is positive, and shows no Canadian can do the job, the applicant receives an automatic 600 points.

That's a much harder bar for an international student, with limited work experience, to meet. As a result, most graduates who were international students do not have LMIAs.

Still, since last spring, new graduates have been receiving invitations.

Recent graduates have also been frustrated by long processing delays. While the government was busy fine-tuning the Express Entry system, thousands of international students who had applied before the new rules came into effect found their applications delayed for as long as 18 months.

"I applied in December, 2014 and did not receive a response until this December," said Babatunde John Olanipekun, a geology PhD graduate from Memorial University in St John's. Mr. Olanipekun missed out on several jobs while waiting for his application to be processed.

"I was stuck in limbo. My wife is a family doctor in Nigeria, but we could not make any decision," he said. "I told [the government] you can't just abandon us," he said.

According to numbers provided by CIC, in December, 6,000 applications submitted under the Canada Experience Class were still awaiting processing at the time.

Dr. Olanipekun's father is an American citizen and he could have applied for a green card, but he chose Canada instead. With his application now approved, he will be taking up a postdoctoral position at a Canadian university later this year.

Mr. McCallum also said the government will engage the provinces on the need to recognize immigrants' foreign credentials.

"There's universal agreement that the foreign credentials issue is a really important one and a really important impediment for newcomers coming to this country. We all know that many doctors and accountants and engineers have to wait for years, perhaps forever, before they can get accredited in Canada," said Mr. McCallum.

While foreign credentials fall under provincial jurisdiction, Mr. McCallum said Ottawa will hold a meeting on the matter with the provinces, territories and Employment and Social Development Canada to "discuss best practices in the area of credentials."