

Immigration

Immigration backlog must be tackled immediately | Sergio R. Karas

By **Sergio R. Karas**

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(May 16, 2022, 9:50 AM EDT) -- The COVID-19 pandemic led to a global crisis, with millions of people unemployed and requiring many others to work from home. Some employees of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) worked remotely, but others did not work at all and still received full pay and benefits.

The closure of IRCC processing facilities affected paper-based applications the most and had a major impact on spousal sponsorships and citizenship as a large inventory accumulated. Work permit extensions, permanent resident cards and other lines of business were processed at a slow pace. In 2020, the Treasury Board published government statistics confirming that 39 per cent of federal employees across all its departments and agencies were approved for leave with pay for close to nine months, at a cost that exceeded \$800 million. It is unclear how many employees on paid leave worked for IRCC but given that many of its offices were closed it is reasonable to conclude that many did not work. Canada was simply

not prepared to deal with secure remote work, and even for those who could work remotely, productivity was lacklustre at best.

Nevertheless, applicants were allowed to continue to submit requests for permits and visas in record numbers. Adding further pressure, the federal government released plans to increase permanent residence grants to over 450,000 in the next three years. The large intake coupled with a decrease in output has resulted in ever-increasing processing times. There are now over 2.1 million applications in the backlog and their number continues to climb.

To deal with the fallout of the pandemic and to reward essential workers, IRCC created several programs like the Temporary Resident to Permanent Resident Pathway and the Agri-Food Pilot. Further, in response to global events, IRCC also created several new programs including one for Hong Kong residents, three for Afghan nationals and most recently, one for Ukrainian nationals affected by the Russian invasion. IRCC has given priority to these programs while putting applicants already working in Canada in highly skilled positions on the backburner.

This situation raises significant concerns and has become a thorny problem not only for IRCC but also for applicants who are awaiting decisions and for their employers. Documents provided become outdated, or their family status changes during the application process, or they changed jobs, creating a domino effect of having to wait even longer for a final decision as current information must be supplied to the authorities.

Applicants in the Federal Skilled Worker Program have not been selected since the start of the pandemic, resulting in many highly qualified individuals being denied the opportunity to immigrate to Canada quickly. Those in the Canadian Experience Class that includes graduates from Canadian educational institutions have not been selected since September 2021 and find themselves in limbo, although the federal government has promised to resume selections this summer. Large numbers of low-skilled foreign nationals are being offered residency in Canada under newly created programs while those with high skills are forced to wait.

IRCC should confront reality and implement a plan to prioritize individuals already working in

Canada. It should openly communicate a strategy that will restrict further intake until the backlog is significantly reduced. The application inventory of permanent resident cards, work permit extensions and certificates of citizenship for Canadians born abroad, which is now suffering from unreasonable delays, should be given top priority. Second, new work permits for individuals with arranged employment must be expedited, to reduce the talent gap that exists in the labour force. Third, the Canadian Experience Class should be split into two categories, one for recent graduates and the other for persons working in Canada under the International Mobility Program to better balance the selection criteria in accordance with labour market conditions. There should be emphasis on science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) graduates with university degrees and on skilled trades in high demand rather than a first come first served criteria that rewards lower skilled individuals marginally employed.

IRCC has failed to provide meaningful communications to applicants regarding their status and expected processing times, which continue to climb. IRCC encourages individuals and their representatives to submit inquiries via webform, but fails to provide substantive replies, relying instead on excuses that include the lag effect of the pandemic and their prioritization of programs responding to global events.

IRCC has been forced to extend Post Graduate Work Permits for an additional 18 months to allow foreign graduates in Canada to maintain their status, as they have not been selected for processing in the Express Entry pool. Given that new cohorts of foreign students are graduating and are likely to apply for permanent residency, it is foreseeable that there will be a tsunami of applications in this class that IRCC will not be able to manage. Tough decisions must be made regarding processing even if they are politically unpalatable. Foreign students should be clearly told that their graduation does not guarantee a path to residency under a new regime, and only the best and brightest and the highly employable will be selected.

IRCC must urgently find a way to tackle the intake of applications and develop a systematic order of priority so applicants will have clear expectations and timelines for decision making. This is especially important as we are likely to enter an economic downturn.

A balance must be struck between the number of new applications and decision-making capacity, utilizing technology and without increasing the size of the bureaucratic apparatus. This was the initial intent of the Express Entry system created in 2015 to clear the large inventories and processing times in visa posts around the world. Unless IRCC implements drastic measures, the backlog and the processing times will continue to increase. The current technology employed by IRCC is cumbersome, antiquated and fails to live up to the standards of the private sector. And finally, IRCC staff productivity must increase. The federal government must act quickly and decisively before the system collapses under its own weight.

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