

Mobility: immigration alert

February 2022

Canada

Canadian immigration in 2022

Executive summary

On 14 February 2022, the Government of Canada put forward its immigration levels plan for 2022-2024. The most notable aspect of the plan is that Canada will continue its very ambitious immigration plan to increase immigration, admitting upwards of 1.3 million new permanent residents by the end of 2024.

In early 2021, the Canadian Government introduced a plan that would admit 411,000 permanent residents by the end of 2022. This objective came at the heels of 2020, which only saw the admission of just below 190,000 permanent residents as a result of processing delays and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, the Canadian Government increased its target to 431,645 permanent residents by the end of 2022, or an increase of just over 5% from its previous objectives. Should this target be met – and it very likely will be met – 2022 promises to be a record-setting year for annual permanent resident admissions, surpassing the record-setting 2021 when Canada admitted the most permanent residents in its history. Most of the permanent residents admitted in 2021 were applicants who were already in Canada on temporary status. That strategy appears to continue under the current 2022 levels, with nearly 60% of admissions in one of the economic classes.

While the targets are ambitious and record setting, there are currently significant processing backlogs, which could impact the Canadian Government's ability to meet these targets and/or delay eligible applicants from applying for Canadian permanent residence status.

A look back

While the plan for 2020 and continuing through the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic was to prioritize foreign high skilled workers in order to fill critical labour shortages and to strengthen Canada's competitiveness on the world economic stage, that strategy shifted mid-way through the COVID-19 pandemic when a one-time only pilot project was introduced to provide certain foreign nationals in Canada employed in essential occupations, a more direct pathway to permanent residence. These select group of essential foreign workers included applicants with work experience in health care and non-health care fields (including a large number of skilled trades), recent international graduates from Canadian institutions, and French-speaking workers and international graduates. 2021 also saw the much needed and swift shift in the immigration strategy to admitting a considerable number of refugees from Afghanistan following that country's fall once again into the hands of the Taliban. To date, over 7,550 Afghans were admitted to Canada, with another 30,000-40,000 Afghans expected over the next 2 years.

A look forward

With that backdrop, and despite an increase in targeted levels for 2022, it is no surprise that the allocation for each immigrant stream will see some change. The number of high skilled workers to be admitted in 2022 under certain economic classes, including the Canadian Experience Class, the Federal Skilled Worker Class, and the Federal Skilled Trades Class, collectively called Federal High Skilled workers - has been reduced by about 50%.



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The allocations for those classes will be displaced largely by new allocations to applicants applying under a one-time only pilot project for certain foreign nationals in the health care fields, in many skilled trades, recent international graduates, and French-speaking workers. In addition, the 2022 level objectives will see an increase in applicants from other economic pilot programs, from the now-permanent Atlantic Immigration Program, and from the Provincial Nomination Program.

The potential displacement of Federal High Skilled Workers is also a result of increased targets in other areas. Family sponsorships will see a slight increase in 2022. The refugee program, as well as admissions based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, will also see an overall target increase by just over 30% compared to 2021 targets (again, according to the Government, in response to the situation in Afghanistan).

Regardless of where the Canadian Government wants to take the immigration portfolio in 2022 and beyond, Canada's ambitious targets can only be met when the immigration department has the capacity to process more applications than ever before. As it stands, a large backlog of approximately 76,000 applicants in Federal High Skilled streams has already grown over the last few months, and the Canadian Government has suggested it would only be able to fully tackle that by the end of 2022. Consequently, the once-favoured Canadian Experience Class has seen a pause in intake since September 2021. The Federal Skilled Worker stream has not invited new applications since December 2020. But those pale in comparison to the Federal Skilled Trades stream, which has not invited new applications since July 2020. Certain announced investments to increase processing capacity, such as hiring new officers and leveraging technology to increase the speed to completion, are welcome news indeed. However, no plan has been put forward to tackle the backlog, and no information has been shared about the progress of these investments. Many hopeful candidates and their employers are anxiously awaiting word on this front.

Given the levels targets set out in the 2022 plan, it is inaccurate to suggest that many Federal High Skilled Workers are being shunned by Canada right now, because the one-time only pilot project introduced in 2021 provides a pathway to permanent residence for many of these workers, albeit under a different immigration stream. It may be more accurate to suggest that with the new levels plan, workers from certain industries and fields are being prioritized over other workers in other industries and fields. Surprisingly, it appears many workers in industries such as engineering, construction, information technology, and finance, who are at the professional, managerial, and executive levels, will likely see their opportunities to transition to permanent residence coming at a much later in time – closer, indeed, to 2024.

Conclusion

It is certainly going to take a delicate balancing act to appease all stakeholders in the immigration landscape, while still meeting Canada's immigration imperatives. No doubt the pandemic is the main culprit in making that balancing act more delicate than it should be. Yet a stronger outcry would have almost certainly emerged had the Government not shown any marked interest in responding to the situation in Afghanistan, or if family reunification was paused for another year or two. The best we can ask for is for the Government to solve one problem without creating another. Any potential consequences should be dealt with swiftly and fairly. For instance, the Government should consider introducing new bridging programs to allow much needed workers – including those on time-limited post-graduate work permits – to remain in Canada long enough to eventually be given a clear path to permanent residence.

Such initiatives will allow Canada to continue to show its leadership in the global competition for international talent. The last thing we want to see is for Canada to lose out on, and lose sight of, foreign workers we absolutely required by Canada to support and sustain our post-pandemic economic recovery. For these reasons, it is also important for employers to advocate on behalf of their foreign workers, to stay vigilant on any new changes to the immigration space, and to seek new measures to ensure the ability to retain much needed workers while they wait their turn in this ever-growing immigration queue. With all that's at stake, it may be nothing less than a make-or-break time for all stakeholders. Whatever pivot the country takes in its immigration strategy, whatever difficult decisions must be made over the coming term, the ultimate goal should be to emerge from this with Canada's glowing international reputation intact.

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ey.com/en_ca

George Reis, Managing Partner
+1 416 943 2535
george.reis@ca.ey.com

Batia Stein, Partner
+1 416 943 3593
batia.j.stein@ca.ey.com

Roxanne Israel, Partner
+1 403 206 5086
roxanne.n.israel@ca.ey.com

Marwah Serag, Partner
+1 416 943 2944
marwah.serag@ca.ey.com

Alex Israel, Partner
+1 416 943 2698
alex.d.israel@ca.ey.com

Christopher Gordon, Partner
+1 416 943 2544
christopher.d.gordon@ca.ey.com

Jonathan Leebosh, Partner
+1 604 899 3560
jonathan.e.leebosh@ca.ey.com

Authored by:
Rafael Fabregas, Manager
+ 1 416 943 2017
rafael.fabregas@ca.ey.com