

# Put out the welcome mat for India's brightest

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Canada and the United States both use immigration to drive innovation in their knowledge economies. But thanks to their more enlightened approach, the Americans have been much more successful than us at attracting star talent from foreign shores. American high-tech start-ups and university-based research programs are critically dependent on educated immigrants from India, China and Taiwan. In 2000, 41% of U.S. PhDs went to foreign citizens. Of the other 59%, many went to Asian-Americans. Unlike their counterparts in Canada, skilled Asian immigrants to the United States are almost always able to escape menial labour. That is largely because educational and professional qualifications from reputable Third World institutions are recognized in the United States, both by government and large employers. Indians in particular have benefited from such far-sighted policies, which is one reason why immigrants from India enjoy the second-highest per capita income of any U.S. ethnic group, behind only Jews. According to the University of California Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, one in 11 Silicon Valley start-ups were founded by Indians. The IT exploits of Indian entrepreneurs such as Vinod Khosla, founder of Sun Microsystems, are now legendary. This success story has brought prosperity to the United States and India alike. Wealthy Indian immigrants have invested billions in India's IT and pharmaceutical industries. Scientists and entrepreneurs have returned to India from the United States to start companies. India's high-tech sector has, in turn, fed the stream of skilled immigrants who have sought jobs in the United States.

The seeds of this virtuous circle of prosperity and innovation were sown a half-century ago when India established a set of universities known as IITs (Indian Institute of Technology). The United States began recruiting graduates from these world-class institutions and providing them with advancement opportunities. Some of the more prominent IIT graduates have included CEOs of American Airlines and McKinsey Consulting. America relies on professional work visas -- such as the H1B and L1 -- to attract well-qualified immigrants. For the last decade, Indian recipients led all nations in H1B visas granted -- one third of the total. As well, India contributes the largest number of foreign students at U.S. universities (75,000 in 2002-03). Additionally, U.S. employers now routinely visit campuses of top Indian universities to recruit graduates. Clearly, America recognizes the value of Indian human resources and does its best to tap this talent pool.

In Canada, the story is very different. Relatively small numbers of skilled Indian immigrants have been admitted. Indians have been submerged in the generic category of "South Asian," along with newcomers from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka -- a category with an average income below that of white Canadians. According to the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario, 35% of South Asians live in poverty here.

Chronic underemployment exists among skilled professionals from visible minority groups in part because Canada casts its immigrant net in too many nations. As a result, the "skilled professional" immigration category has lost its lustre. Confronted with immigrants arriving from a bewildering array of countries and academic institutions, each with its own divergent standards, recruiters are unable to separate the wheat from the chaff. With little guidance

from government, the corporate sector often resorts to a blanket dismissal of all foreign credentials.

Public sector institutions are equally guilty. While Canada suffers from shortages of medical professionals and teachers, thousands of excellent foreign doctors, nurses and teachers languish in menial labour. Bodies responsible for licensing foreign professionals lack transparent regulations and unjustifiably devalue foreign training and experience.

Canada should adjust its immigration policies to favour nations such as India, which have democratic forms of government, strong education systems and a proven track record of supplying elite Western universities and corporations with academic talent. Moreover, immigration officials must consult closely with employers. In many cases, corporate recruiters are in a position to provide valuable insight into what nations and institutions are likely to supply skilled professionals, and so will not require excessive training or re-certification.

One possible solution is to change the way Citizenship and Immigration Canada is staffed. Rather than depending solely on lifelong bureaucrats who are divorced from Canadian business realities, it would make more sense to recruit industry professionals. Ideally, these recruits would include successful Canadian immigrants who have the personal background necessary to appraise the scholastic and professional credentials of prospective immigrants from promising nations.

Canada can gain immensely from its immigrant population. Changing the proportion of immigrants to favour those with relevant credentials from democratic nations, empowering previously landed skilled immigrants in the decision-making process for new immigrants, and creating a business environment that favours entrepreneurialism will enable the creation of our own Vinod Khoslas and Silicon Valleys.

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