

Evaluation of the Citizenship Program

Executive Summary

Research and Evaluation Branch

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Executive summary

This report presents the findings of the evaluation of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's (IRCC) Citizenship Program. The evaluation was conducted in fulfillment of requirements under the 2016 Treasury Board *Policy on Results*, and considered program performance with a focus on the citizenship grants line of business and program management. The evaluation covered the period from 2013 to 2018, with some consideration of earlier years to better understand the implications of policy changes, uptake trends and program developments.

Overview of the Citizenship Program

The Citizenship Program administers citizenship legislation and promotes the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, impacting both newcomers who wish to become citizens as well as current Canadians. Broadly, the Citizenship Program consists of citizenship awareness, citizenship acquisition, confirmation and revocation, and program management.

To obtain Canadian citizenship, individuals must first meet eligibility requirements, complete and submit an application, and attend a ceremony where the oath of citizenship is recited before a citizenship judge. Applicants pay a fee for the grant application (\$100 for a minor grant application and \$530 for an adult grant application), and applicants aged 18 years and older pay a \$100 fee for the Right to be a Citizen. Naturalized citizens are conferred legal status in the country and receive rights, namely the right to vote, hold public office and the right to remain in Canada. For many, citizenship is a significant milestone of their integration. Of the 2,826,300 permanent residents admitted to Canada between 2005 and 2015, 50% were naturalized citizens by December 31st, 2018, and a further 7% had applied for citizenship.

Broadly, the Citizenship Program expects to contribute to eligible permanent residents becoming Canadian citizens by ensuring that Canadian citizenship involves active engagement and is a valued status, that citizenship is accessible to all who meet eligibility requirements, including vulnerable groups; and that client service standards are predefined and maintained. In doing so, the department must also ensure that newcomers and Canadians are aware of the responsibilities and privileges associated with Canadian citizenship, that newcomers to Canada have a desire to become citizens, and that the integrity of Canadian Citizenship is protected through a robust processing and policy framework.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the evaluation found that, with time, most permanent residents (PR) become Canadian citizens. However, the citizenship uptake rate can vary for different populations, and has declined among more recent immigrants, suggesting that newcomers are taking longer to become citizens. While there are many reasons for obtaining citizenship, evidence suggested that wanting to feel fully Canadian and to make Canada their permanent home are primary motivators for PRs. It was observed that the grant application approval rate is very high, and recent changes to eligibility under Bill C-6 have generally been facilitative. Furthermore, increases to the application fee over the evaluation period did not have a major impact on overall uptake.

Nevertheless, while most PRs do eventually obtain citizenship, accessing it comes with significant challenges for some, specifically those from more vulnerable groups.

Evidence showed that meeting the language and knowledge requirements can be difficult, particularly for refugees, as well as for those with low official language proficiency and less

education. While the *Citizenship Act* has built in some discretion to waive these requirements on compassionate grounds, compassionate considerations are not well defined, and waivers are typically predicated on a medical opinion. Moreover, waivers have to be requested by applicants, but the waiver process is not well known and difficult to navigate. Evidence showed very few waivers requested or granted during the evaluation period. However, given the issues noted, it was unclear whether these numbers reflected an appropriate level of use of this mechanism.

In addition, the application fee was found to be a common challenge, particularly for refugees, families and those with lower income. The Citizenship Program does not currently offer any flexibility around grant application fees. The fee structure is set out in the *Citizenship Regulations*, and provides individual rates for adult and minor grants.

With this in mind, there is a need to re-examine the waiver process and fee structure in order to ensure that sufficient mechanisms are in place to facilitate equitable access to citizenship and to better serve and support prospective applicants who may be facing socio-economic challenges, as well as families with multiple applications and fees to pay.

Recommendation 1: IRCC should review the costs associated with applying for citizenship and implement a strategy to address the affordability of citizenship for prospective applicants facing economic challenges.

Recommendation 2: IRCC should implement and promote a clear and transparent process for knowledge and language waivers to ensure consistent access and decision-making for prospective applicants who need them.

The evaluation also found that the citizenship eligibility requirements related to physical presence, language and knowledge are largely set at an appropriate level. While there are various tools and methods in place to support the assessment of these requirements, findings were mixed in terms of their effectiveness, highlighting important challenges to be addressed.

It was observed that while the requirement for physical presence is clearly defined, it can be difficult for applicants to prove, as well as for IRCC officers to verify, without entry-exit information. For language, it was noted that the range of evidence accepted is very broad and does not always reflect the applicant's actual language ability. When there are concerns, it can be difficult for IRCC officers to assess language ability, as the tools in place are subjective and officers are not formal assessors. For knowledge, it was noted that the test and study guide have a higher language level than that of the language requirement, and there is a need for more tools and support for applicants.

At the time of the evaluation, implementation of a new Entry/Exit Program was already underway, which was expected to address issues related to tracking and verifying physical presence in the future. In addition, a new approach for the knowledge assessment tools was being developed, with a new study guide and supporting materials, but had not yet been implemented at the time of the evaluation.

Thus, while a strategy is being implemented to improve the tools and methods available to assess physical presence in Canada, there is still a need to address outstanding challenges with respect to the tools and methods in place to assess the language and knowledge requirements.

Recommendation 3: IRCC should review the language verification process and put in place a strategy to ensure that IRCC officers are more effectively equipped to validate language evidence and better supported to assess language ability when needed.

Recommendation 4: IRCC should move forward with its plan to implement a new approach for the knowledge requirement, which could include a revised study guide and additional tools, to improve the accessibility of the required information and enhance supports for prospective applicants studying for and taking the knowledge test.

Overall, integration outcomes were positive for naturalized citizens. It was observed that many feel a sense of belonging to Canada, their province or territory and to their community. They have social connections in Canada and confidence in Canadian institutions. Moreover, many are performing well economically, and some are volunteering and participating in groups, organizations or associations.

It was also observed that many PRs, particularly those intending to apply for citizenship, feel a sense of belonging, have social connections and confidence in Canadian institutions, suggesting that newcomers with stronger feelings of connection to Canada have a desire to become Canadian. In addition, while a difference in employment earnings was found between PRs and naturalized citizens, this difference was not attributable to citizenship, but rather to the socio-economic characteristics of those obtaining it, largely previous earnings and length of time in Canada.

Differences between PRs and naturalized citizens were also found for volunteering and group membership. They were found to be more prevalent among naturalized citizens, followed by PRs intending to apply for citizenship, and lowest among those not intending to apply. The rates of volunteering and group membership also varied based on socio-economic characteristics.

Thus, evaluation results highlight the relationships between integration and engagement in Canadian society, and some of the dynamics of decision-making around citizenship. Becoming Canadian and active engagement are at the core of IRCC's Citizenship Program objectives. While these objectives are generally seen as relevant and appropriate, the program has limited mechanisms and resources to influence them. At present, IRCC's citizenship promotion activities are largely newcomer-focused and tied to the citizenship grant process or funded by the Settlement Program, which excludes citizens from its eligibility.

With this in mind, there is a need to ensure that the department's objectives for citizenship promotion are aligned with the activities, mechanisms and resources in place to achieve them.

Recommendation 5: IRCC should review its objectives for citizenship promotion, and the corresponding activities, mechanisms and resources available, and develop and implement a plan to better support the achievement of its expected outcomes.