RECOMMENDATION
The government should change the eligibility guidelines under the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) Express Entry program to allow international students to count full-time, work-integrated learning experience as eligible work experience.

UCRU’s recommendation is based off two principles: international students with Canadian university awarded degrees should have equal job prospects as their domestic counterparts; and international students’ full-time, paid experiential and work-integrated learning experiences — gained while they’re full-time students — should count towards their eligibility for Permanent Resident (PR) status.

Canadian research-intensive universities disproportionately attract international students for a variety of different reasons: the institutions’ focus on experiential and work-integrated learning opportunities. In fact, more than half of today’s undergraduate students have a form of work-integrated learning experience, which include: Co-op, internships, and research placements that are often full-time23. As the President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calgary Dr. Elizabeth Cannon said, these experiential and work-integrated learning programs look to meet the need for “highly trained university graduates to meet upcoming labour market shortages. Job projections by the Canadian government show that between 2013 and 2022, there will be 5.8 million job openings. More than 65 percent of those will require postsecondary training”24.

This Government has also realized the need and importance of increasing the number of post-secondary graduates with work-integrated learning opportunities to address any potential shortages in a competitive, high-skilled labour market. In fact, on August 31st, Bardish Chagger, MP of Waterloo and Minister of Small Business and Tourism, announced the creation of the Information Technology Association of Canada (ITAC) career ready program. The program will look to connect students from STEM and Business fields with small-to-medium sized tech companies and incentivize companies by providing up to a maximum of $5,000 to subsidize student wages. The announcement illustrates the government’s commitment to increasing access to work integrated learning opportunities to prepare graduates with the skills needed to be competitive in today’s global labour market25.
International students’ success is tied to Canada’s success in addressing Canada’s labour shortage. With decreasing domestic enrollment and increased international student enrollment in work-integrated/co-op programs, removing barriers to accessing the Canadian labour market post-graduation — and clearing a path towards permanent residency — is a critical part of the solution in meeting the long-term challenges around future labour shortages. International students under the current Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) are still being denied permanent resident status because under the current eligibility guidelines, they have not accumulated enough work experience in their fields or an “in demand” occupation during the approved duration of their work permit — which on average is about two to three years without the option to reapply.

Upon graduation, International students show a strong desire to stay and work in Canada, however, employers are avoiding hiring highly skilled, post-secondary educated, international students because of unpredictability around their long-term immigration status; and the optics of hiring an international student or foreign worker over a Canadian grad/worker through the Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). Although the Canadian government announced it would award international students up to 30 additional points for a Canadian post-secondary degree or diploma, the changes do not significantly clear the path towards Permanent Residence (PR) for international students under a system you need to receive 600 points. The announced changes also did not alter the qualifications under the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) Express Entry program — which international students use to apply for PR: “Self-employment and work experience gained while you were a full-time student (such as on co-op work term) doesn’t count under this program.” Removing this as an eligibility criteria would improve international student’s chance at gaining PR status and increase Canada’s international student post-graduation attainment rate — which is at about 32 per cent for those with a Bachelor’s degree.