

Retaining talent: New pathways for skilled migrants

For many people looking to make Aotearoa their long-term home, the Skilled Migrant Category (SMC) Resident Visa remains the main pathway to residence. The category is designed to attract skilled workers who can contribute to New Zealand's economy and fill ongoing labour market needs.

The current SMC system, introduced in 2023, is a points-based system. Applicants need to achieve six points through a combination of occupational registration, qualifications, income, and New Zealand skilled work experience. One criticism of the current system is that it can favour formal qualifications over practical experience. The Government has acknowledged that the system does not work well for those whose expertise has been gained through practical experience rather than formal qualifications. Economic Growth Minister Nicola Willis said the changes were developed after businesses reported difficulties retaining experienced workers who could not qualify for residence under the current settings.

As a result, changes to the SMC are coming into effect on 24 August 2026.

New Skilled Work Experience Pathway

One of the most significant changes is the introduction of the Skilled Work Experience Pathway. This will allow migrants to gain residence from work experience alone. It is separate to the points-based system.

This pathway is aimed at migrants working in skilled roles who may not hold higher-level qualifications but have extensive industry experience. To qualify, generally applicants must be working in or have a job offer for an ANZSCO

skill level 1 to 3 occupation, have at least five years of directly relevant work experience, including two years of skilled work experience in New Zealand, and earn at least 1.1 times the median wage. Applicants will still need to meet health, character and English language requirements.

Some level 1-3 occupations have different requirements or are not eligible. If the role is on the "Amber" list, then the worker will need to be earning at least 1.2 times the median wage.

If the role is on the "Red" list, then the worker will not be eligible for this pathway. That includes roles like beauty therapists, retail managers and massage therapists.

New Trades and Technician Pathway

New Zealand continues to face skill shortages across a range of trade occupations, yet some tradespeople have struggled to meet the current residence requirements despite being in high demand.

A second pathway will also be introduced for tradespeople and technicians.

The Trades and Technician Pathway is intended for individuals working in specified trade and technical occupations where degree-level qualifications are not typically required. Applicants will need a relevant Level 4 qualification or higher and at least four years of post-qualification experience, including 18 months of skilled work experience in New Zealand paid at or above the median wage.

Other Changes to the Skilled Migrant Category

The August reforms also include several changes to existing eligibility requirements.

Retaining Talent: New Pathways for Skilled Migrants (Continued)

The Government is increasing recognition of New Zealand qualifications by providing greater benefits for migrants who have completed university-level study here. This change is intended to incentivise people to study in New Zealand.

Applicants will also be able to get 4 points for a bachelor's degree or post-graduate certificate gained outside of New Zealand (compared to 3 points under the current rules).

In addition, the residence wage threshold rules are being simplified. For many applicants, the relevant wage threshold will be determined when they begin gaining their qualifying New Zealand work experience, rather than requiring them to meet a higher threshold at the time they apply for residence.

Conclusion

For employers, these reforms should help retain valuable staff who have already demonstrated their commitment to living and working in New Zealand. For migrants, they provide welcome recognition that valuable skills can be gained through experience as well as formal study.

Want to know more?

If you have any questions about the SMC please contact our specialist [Employment](#) and [Immigration](#) Team.