

# Global Immigration alert

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## New Zealand

### New Zealand implements significant changes to its Skilled Migrant Category and Work to Residence pathways

#### Executive summary

Immigration New Zealand, the official government authority responsible for managing country's immigration system, has recently implemented significant changes to the Skilled Migrant Category (SMC) Resident Visa and related Work to Residence pathways, effective 24 August 2026. The reforms introduce two new SMC pathways, amend the existing points-based pathway, clarify wage threshold rules, and strengthen qualification, work experience and genuine employment requirements.

#### Key developments

Key developments include:

- **Three SMC pathways:** The existing points-based pathway has been retained and is now accompanied by two new pathways: the Trades and Technician pathway and the Skilled Work Experience pathway.
- **Trades and Technician pathway:** Applicants must work in an eligible occupation and earn at least the SMC wage threshold. They must hold a relevant New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF) level four or higher qualification, have at least two and a half years of relevant post-qualification work experience and complete a further one and a half years of skilled work in New Zealand at the applicable wage threshold, with remuneration at or above the median wage (currently NZD\$35 per hour).
- **Skilled Work Experience pathway:** Applicants must work in, or have a job offer for an Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) skill level one to three occupation paid at least 1.1 times the SMC wage threshold. They must have at least three years of relevant work experience and complete a further two years of qualifying skilled work in New Zealand. Red and Amber occupation List restrictions apply. ANZSCO skill level four or five occupations and roles on the Red List are not eligible. Amber List

occupations must be paid at least 1.2 times the SMC wage threshold.

- **Wage thresholds:** Applicants may begin accruing qualifying New Zealand work experience when their hourly rate meets the threshold in effect at that time. Their hourly rate does not need to be increased to match increases in the wage threshold over time but cannot fall below their original qualifying rate.
- A five-month grace period applies if the threshold increases between the grant of the work visa and the start of employment.
- **Evidence requirements:** Work experience claimed under the new pathways must be directly relevant and supported by independently verifiable evidence. Self-employment cannot be used to meet these requirements.
  - **Related pathways:** The Work to Residence, Care Workforce Work to Residence and Transport Work to Residence pathways have also been aligned with the updated SMC wage settings.
  - **Points-based pathway:** Additional points are now available for certain New Zealand qualifications:
    - **Level seven bachelor's degree:** Five points for a New Zealand qualification and four points for an offshore qualification.
    - **Level eight honours or postgraduate qualification:** Five points for a New Zealand qualification and four points for an offshore qualification. A bachelor's degree is required.
    - **Level nine master's degree not completed through full-time study:** five points for a New Zealand qualification.
    - **Level nine master's degree completed through 30 weeks of full-time study:** Six points for a New Zealand

qualification and five points for an offshore qualification. A bachelor's degree is required.

- **Level 10 doctoral degree:** Six points for both New Zealand and offshore qualifications.
- **Stronger genuine employment requirements:** Employment offers across skilled residence categories must be available and ongoing, with a genuine need for the role to be based in New Zealand. The revised provisions apply to the SMC Resident Visa, Work to Residence Visa and Straight to Residence Visa and provide clearer grounds to decline applications where employment arrangements are considered non-genuine.

### Impact on employers

The changes provide greater certainty on wage thresholds, but increase the importance of complete, independently verifiable evidence. Employers supporting residence applicants should:

- Review employee eligibility under each of the three SMC pathways.
- Confirm wage tracking and payroll records align with the applicable threshold.
- Check qualification evidence and any international qualification assessment requirements.
- Assess whether the role is available, ongoing and genuinely required in New Zealand.
- Prepare for increased scrutiny of employment and work experience documentation.

### Key steps

EY will continue to monitor these developments. Should you have any questions, we encourage you to contact one of our immigration professionals.

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