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TURNER HOPKINS IMMIGRATION SPECIALISTS

SMC UPDATES

AUGUST 2026

YOUR GUIDE TO THE SKILLED MIGRANT CATEGORY CHANGES



SKILLED MIGRANT CATEGORY - SMC

The Skilled Migrant Category or **SMC** for short is the mainstay of New Zealand's immigration system, allowing skilled, employable applicants to secure a pathway to residence.

The SMC system is made up of different visa pathways, depending on the type of job you secure in New Zealand.

The two key pathways are the **Green List** categories, which are divided in to a straight to residence and work to residence option and then the points-based pathway.

In 2025, the Government announced, significant changes to the points-based system, including the introduction of two new assessment categories, the reduction of the maximum work experience required from three years, down to two and the introduction of red and amber occupation lists.

For those considering a move to New Zealand in 2026, as a skilled migrant, understanding these changes will be crucial.



WHAT'S NEW?

In August 2026, the Government will roll out significant changes to the SMC category, which will include the following:

- A new **“pillar”** or category for those with work skilled work experience only, e.g. no formal qualifications.
- A new **“pillar”** or category for skilled technicians and tradespeople.
- Reduce the **NZ work experience** required across most categories, making the maximum two years, rather than the current three.
- Introduce an **“Amber”** list of occupations that will require additional criteria to be met.
- Introduce a **“Red”** list of occupations that will not be eligible to apply under the new work experience pathway (they can still apply under the other points pathways).
- **No higher wage threshold** at the residence application stage ; just maintain the median wage during any required period of work experience.

These changes will open the door to a much wider pool of potential applicants.



OPPORTUNITIES...

The changes coming in August, allow those who previously could not qualify under the existing points system to secure a pathway to residence.

Under the existing criteria applicants need to either hold a minimum bachelor degree level qualification **or** work in a registered occupation, **or** earn at least 1.5 times the SMC median wage.

For many applicants, particularly those in the trades, the existing criteria were simply out of reach.

The two new pathways (**work experience and trades and technicians**) open the door to these applicants to be able to apply where previously they might not have been able to.

The reduction in work experience also means that for many applicants the pathway to residence just became **a lot quicker** and also makes us far more competitive as compared to other migrant destinations.



CHALLENGES...

The introduction of the **Amber** and **Red** lists will create issues for some applicants and could mean specific applicants are no longer eligible.

The reason these two lists are being introduced is based on the fact that the occupations being targeted are often difficult for INZ to assess or used by some applicants to claim they are skilled when they aren't.

The **Amber list** will allow applicants to apply but the occupation will have extra criteria added in order for someone to be eligible.

The **Red list** will mean applicants can not apply under the new work experience pathway, but can still potentially apply under the other pathways (degree, registration or income).

Details of the occupations to be added to the lists and the additional criteria (for Amber list roles) will be released along with the full set of updates in August.



NEXT STEPS

If you are considering a move to NZ as a skilled migrant or maybe you are already here, and need to make that next step towards residence, we can help.

- 1 We start by assessing your eligibility and determining the particular pathway you will be able to qualify for.
- 2 We provide a clear quote of costs for us to assist you through the process and the applicable Government fees and potential relocation expenses involved.
- 3 Once you are onboard, we provide a detailed set of instructions, outlining the process we will follow, the strategy we have created and the documents required.
- 4 We work closely with you to achieve your end goal, adjusting your plan as necessary and managing the visa process from start to finish.

Our focus for all clients is starting with the right foundation, which is achieved with that initial eligibility assessment and then preparing the client for all the various steps that will follow.



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