

China Work Visa: Unified Work Permit Benefits Foreigners

In an effort to attract more foreign talents, the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs (SAFEA) has quickened reform to make it easier for foreigners to apply for China's work visa.

Effective on April 1, 2017, the SAFEA rolled out a unified work permit system nationwide that began to process applications both 'foreign experts' and ordinary foreign nationals, referred to as R visas and Z visas respectively.

The new system uses a points-based, three-tiered classification system to evaluate which candidates qualify for the work permit.

Compared with the old system, the new one requires fewer supporting application materials, provides a more transparent evaluation process, and shortens turnaround time.

Foreign applicants will benefit from this restructure of the foreign work permit system due to its simpler, clearer, and less time-consuming application process.

Two-in-one reform versus old system

A standard procedure for obtaining a foreigner's work visa normally involves three critical steps: an application for an employment license, a work visa application at a Chinese embassy, and obtainment of an employment permit.

Under the [old system](#), there were [two government entities](#), the Human Resources and Social Security Bureau (HRSS) and the SAFEA, governing the foreign work visa application process.

The HRSS issued the Employment License and Alien Employment Permit to Z-visa applicants, while the SAFEA issued the Foreign Expert License and Foreign Expert Certificate to R-visa applicants.

However, starting from April 1, the SAFEA became solely responsible for processing all foreign work visa applications. In other words, both Z-visa and R-visa applicants need to submit their applications to only the SAFEA without confusion over where to apply.

In addition, the Employment License and Foreign Expert License have been integrated into a single Notification Letter of Foreigner's Work Permit, and the Alien Employment Permit and the Foreign Expert Certificate unified into the Foreigner's Work Permit ID card. Each Foreigner's Work Permit card will have a unique ID number that does not change regardless of permit renewal or change of employer.

Online application

Under the new system, the employer and foreign applicant can complete the application and submit necessary supporting documents electronically.



An online management service system for foreign workers in China (Management Service System) established by the SAFEA will manage the [online registration process](#). Application materials required for submission are reduced by almost half, with submissions like personal CVs and application letters no longer necessary. The following documents are required:

- Application form for Foreigner’s Work Permit;
- Verification of past employment;
- Verification of education or a verification of professional qualification;
- Criminal record certificate;
- Physical examination record for foreigner or overseas Chinese;
- Copy of the job contract or appointment letter;
- Passport;
- ID photo; and
- Information of accompanying members.

Documents required by applicant’s employer:

- Registration form;
- Business license and organization code certificate;
- ID information of the employer/agent who is responsible for the registration;
- Industry license documents.

Tiered classification

The SAFEA has adopted a point based three-tiered classification system as a primary method to evaluate which candidates qualify for the new work permit.

The classification system divides candidates into three categories: A (above 85 points) for high level talent, B (85 – 60) for professional personnel, and C (less than 60) for non-technical or service workers hired on a temporary or seasonal basis.

The SAFEA assigns scores to each candidate based on his or her education background, salary level, age, time spent working in China, Chinese language proficiency, employment location, etc.

Tier	Candidates	Ease of Application	Points Required
A	Highly qualified top talent	Highly encouraged	85+
B	Professional talent in line with labor market demand	Generally controlled	60-85
C	Unskilled workers	Strictly limited	Below 60

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In addition to the points-based classification system, the SAFEA defines a set of special conditions when a candidate qualifies for ‘A’, ‘B’, or ‘C’ level.



The SAFEA explicitly listed all special conditions for each status' level in the Classification Standard for Foreign Workers in China (Pilot). If a candidate meets any of those special conditions, the SAFEA will flag a corresponding level to this person without calculating the total score.

For example, A level can automatically be granted to international award recipients, Fortune Global 500 company senior managers or technicians, intellectual property holders of high profile companies, and post-doctoral degree holders under 40 years old. All A level candidates are eligible for service through a 'green channel', which offers a pre-entry visa, paperless verification, expedited approval, and other facilitation treatment.

Validity of an Employment Permit

While the maximum validity of a Foreigner's Employment Permit is five years, in practice [five-year permits](#) are rarely granted. First-time applicants are more likely to receive a one-year permit and then renewals for a multi-year work permit.

Although the Beijing Labor Bureau has started to grant more multi-year Employment Permits to first-time applicants, other first-tier cities, including Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, grant them far less frequently.

Consider regional variations

As the Management Service System and relative regulating measures are still under testing, regulatory changes could occur in the near future to optimize the new system.

Additionally, new incentives may be implemented first in China's Free Trade Zones (FTZs) and later integrated into the national model.

In January this year, a [new policy](#) which lowers the application thresholds for foreign master's graduates from Chinese and "well known" overseas universities is an extension of a scheme piloted in the Shanghai FTZ.

It is therefore recommended that work visa applicants stay up-to-date with both the national scheme and regional policies, as local bureaus have administrative leverage when implementing the national model.

A first hand source who classified themselves as a B level candidate and made an application under the new system has indicated that preparation of necessary documents for application can be an extremely taxing and time consuming task if education and work experience was gathered internationally.

Thus, sufficient preparation and company support is essential to the application process. Companies looking to hire foreign staff should not hesitate to reach out for professional HR guidance to ensure their employees successfully receive China work visas.

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