

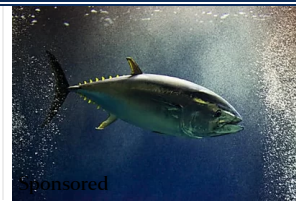
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People are silhouetted against the Sydney Opera House at sunset in Australia. PHOTO: REUTERS

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String of recent moves from countries to tighten work visa, immigration rules



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Rising xenophobia may well put the kibosh on Singaporeans aspiring to live and work in the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, as the authorities in those countries move to tighten rules for skilled work visas amid heightened tension over immigration.

New Zealand tightened access to its skilled work visas on April 19, a day after Australia scrapped its 457 visa scheme for skilled foreign workers, and US President Donald Trump signed an executive order directing federal agencies to review employment immigration laws to promote "Hire American" policies.

AUSTRALIA TIGHTENS THE SPIGOT

Australia's abolition of the 457 visa programme, which allowed workers to stay for up to four years and eventually seek permanent residency, could potentially affect up to 875 Singaporeans, according to data from Australia's Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

Under the new rules, workers can now either apply for a two-year or a four-year visa, but only the latter will lead to residency. In addition, some 216 occupations to which the visa applies - including biochemist and multimedia designer, among others - have been cut. The changes will likely affect visa applications lodged after April 19 and those seeking to extend their visas or change employers, immigration specialist Newland Chase Australia managing director Tony Le Nevez said.

The changes could also affect about 8,000 Singaporeans who study at Australian universities each year, and who plan to stay on and work after graduating.



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The Australian government has also made it harder for migrants to become citizens. They now have to wait four years before applying for citizenship, instead of one year.

But the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said the changes will not affect plans to increase the flow of workers between Australia and Singapore under the Free Trade Agreement and the Australia-Singapore Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

"Australia's commitments under the Singapore-Australia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) and the Agreement to Amend SAFTA are not affected by the recently announced citizenship or visa reforms," a department spokesman told The Straits Times.

STIFFER VISA RULES FOR NZ

In a similar vein, New Zealand also made it harder for migrants to receive skilled visas by raising the minimum income required to NZ\$49,000 (S\$47,193).

Those earning less than the minimum will receive no points towards their visa application, but those earning more than NZ\$97,000 a year will have extra points. Those earning less than NZ\$73,000 a year will be classified as low-skilled and will be eligible only for a three-year visa.

The changes follow record levels of immigration to New Zealand which have sparked concerns about congestion and housing supply.

'AMERICA FIRST'

Meanwhile, Mr Trump's latest "Buy American and Hire American" executive order makes no immediate changes to work visa programmes, but directs the US Departments of Labour, Justice, and Homeland Security to study existing laws and procedures, and recommend changes.

In the case of H-1B visas, the agencies are to suggest changes to help ensure that these are awarded to the most skilled and best-paid immigrant workers. These visas are in hot demand around the world among skilled professionals, especially those working in the tech sector.

Fast-track processing of the H-1B was suspended as of April 3 for up to six months but there have been no announced changes to normal processing times and "no expected changes to wait times for visa interviews or visa process times", US Embassy Singapore spokesman Camille Dawson said.

Ms Becki Young of Hammond Young Immigration Law in Maryland said the intent of the executive order is both to protect US workers and to combat fraud.

"They are very interested in large employers like Cognizant, Infosys and Tata, which are the biggest users of the H-1B visas, and are most concerned with those employing lower-level skilled workers."

Some observers note that the H-1B programme may depress the wages of US workers, since the primary objective of some companies in the tech industry is to employ lower-paid skilled workers.

"On the other hand, some sectors can't fill jobs; there are an estimated 100,000 to 350,000 unfilled entry-level cyber security jobs in the US economy starting at around US\$80,000 (S\$112,000) a year, supposedly because such jobs are considered unsexy in the IT world," Ms Young said.

Mr Ranjan Guha, California-based Interra IT's president, North American operations, said: "The skills sets are available in the US, (but) maybe not in the volumes that are required. If workers are genuinely unavailable locally, some form of correction will take place. ... There will be pressure from industry itself."

UK MAKES HIRING FOREIGNERS MORE EXPENSIVE

Meanwhile, the British government tightened work visa rules by raising the salary threshold for new non-European Union applicants of its Tier 2 skilled worker visa earlier this month to £30,000 (S\$54,000) a year from £25,000 a year.

It also made hiring foreigners more expensive for companies, setting a £1,000 "immigration skills charge" to deter firms from taking on migrant workers. This, after Home Secretary Amber Rudd warned businesses that foreigners should not be able to "take jobs that British people should do."

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

The Straits Times understands that the tightening work visa rules are not an issue for local companies like Singtel, which has operations in Australia and the US. That is because its operations are mostly staffed by locals there.

The tightening of work visa rules in those countries will likely hinder Singaporeans' ability to work there, but there are alternatives within Asean under the regional integration initiative Asean Economic Community (AEC), which could help boost Singapore's growth even as its working population ages, Oxford Economics Asia economist Sian Fenner said.

Restrictions on global labour mobility can lead to labour shortages in some industries, creating supply chain bottlenecks, reducing competitiveness and productivity.

Some economists have estimated that allowing free cross-border movement of labour could more than double the world's gross domestic product. A proponent, Mr Michael Clemens, a senior fellow at the US Centre for Global Development, maintained that barriers on immigration amount to leaving "trillion-dollar bills on the sidewalk".

NOT ALL FOLLOWING SUIT

Fortunately, not all governments are turning xenophobic. India and Singapore are in talks over easing restrictions for Indian software companies here, in the review of the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement.

China recently launched a reform of its green cards to try to lure more foreign professionals to take up permanent residency. Renewable every five or 10 years, it allows PRs to live in China, buy property and enrol their children in public schools.

The reforms include issuing new ID cards this year that will have foreigners' identity information embedded in the chips of the machine-readable cards, which can be used at railway and airline departments, hotels and banks.

That should make it easier to access public services in China by June, Xinhua news agency reported on April 17.

•Additional reporting by Jonathan Pearlman in Sydney, Nirmal Ghosh in Washington, Tan Dawn Wei, and Chong Koh Ping in Beijing

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