Employment passes and immigration policy

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland and Germany),
Solicitor (England & Wales and Hong Kong)
Of Counsel, KGP Legal LLC
alexander.ressos@kgplegal.com.sg
www.ressos.com.sg

The foundations: Contact Singapore and the pass system of 1998

Singapore has always been a city of immigrants, as Part A described for the nineteenth century. The modern policy of recruiting foreign professionals took shape in the 1990s. In 1997 the International Talent Division of the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) launched Contact Singapore, an agency that began with six offices abroad to promote the city to foreign professionals. In his National Day Rally speech of the same year, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong explained that the open recruitment of foreigners "did not extend only to top-rung prestigious positions", since it also reached middle management, skilled workers and technicians.[1]

The administrative framework followed. On 1 September 1998 a new system of employment passes, classified by qualifications and salary into P, Q and R passes, came into force. An S Pass for mid-level skilled workers was added on 1 July 2004. The STAR Committee, formed in November 1998, and the Manpower 21 plan of 1999 set out the strategy of attracting foreign talent to support growth.[2] The timing had its reasons. The Asian financial crisis of 1997, which Chapter D.III describes,

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

had shown how exposed the city was, while the wealth management strategy described in Chapter D.V required private bankers, fund managers and lawyers that Singapore could not yet train in sufficient numbers.

The Employment Pass and the qualifying salary

The Employment Pass (EP) is today the principal permit for foreign professionals, managers and executives. Its first condition is a minimum monthly salary, which MOM sets and periodically raises. For new applications in 2026, the qualifying salary is S$5,600 in most sectors and S$6,200 in financial services. Both amounts rise progressively with age from 23, reaching S$10,700 and S$11,800 respectively for candidates aged 45 and above.[3]

A further increase has been announced. From 1 January 2027 for new applications and from 1 January 2028 for renewals, the qualifying salary rises to S$6,000 in general and to S$6,600 in financial services, with the upper amounts for older candidates rising to S$11,500 and S$12,700.[4] The higher threshold for financial services reflects the higher salaries paid in the sector. It also reflects a policy judgement: since the sector pays well, a foreign hire at the general threshold would more easily displace a local candidate. Between 2021 and 2025 the threshold for financial services rose from S$5,000 to S$6,200, while that for other sectors rose from S$4,500 to S$5,600.[5]

COMPASS: a points test for complementarity

The salary threshold alone did not answer the political question of whether foreign professionals complemented the local workforce or replaced it. Since September 2023 the EP has therefore had a second stage, the Complementarity Assessment Framework, known as COMPASS.[6] An application must score 40 points. Four core criteria each yield up to 20 points: salary, qualifications, diversity and support for local employment. Two bonus criteria add points for skills in short supply and for strategic economic priorities.[7]

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

The diversity and local employment criteria are the most original elements. A firm with 25 or more professional, managerial, executive and technical staff (PMETs) earns 20 points for diversity if the candidate's nationality makes up less than 5 per cent of those staff, ten points between 5 and 25 per cent and nothing at 25 per cent or more. For local employment, the same firm earns 20 points if its share of local PMETs reaches the median of its sector, ten points between the 20th percentile and the median and nothing below the 20th percentile. A local PMET share of at least 70 per cent guarantees ten points. Smaller firms receive ten points by default on each criterion.[8]

The design shows the mind of the Singapore state. Quotas by nationality would offend the city's self-image as an open hub. COMPASS therefore gives firms an incentive to diversify their foreign staff and to employ locals at the level of their peers. A bank whose trading desk is dominated by one nationality will find it harder to bring in another colleague of that nationality. The Shortage Occupation List adds a bonus of up to 20 points for jobs that require highly specialised skills in short supply. Candidates who rely on those points remain tied to the shortage occupation and may be redeployed only after notifying MOM.[9]

Three categories of candidate are exempt from COMPASS: those with a fixed monthly salary of at least S$22,500, overseas intra-corporate transferees and those filling a role for one month or less.[10] The salary exemption matters for the financial centre, since senior bankers, portfolio managers and heads of desk usually earn more than that amount. In practice COMPASS bites hardest on the middle ranks: analysts, operations staff, compliance officers and junior relationship managers.

The Fair Consideration Framework

COMPASS builds on an older instrument. The Fair Consideration Framework was announced on 23 September 2013. From 1 August 2014 employers making new EP applications had to show that they had been unable to find suitable Singaporean candidates, by advertising the vacancy on a national jobs bank, open to Singaporeans, for at least 14 calendar days.[11] Firms with a disproportionately low share of Singaporeans among their PMETs compared with their industry peers face

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

additional scrutiny. Since 1 September 2023 the advertising requirement no longer applies to candidates earning S$22,500 a month or more, in line with the COMPASS exemption.[12]

The Workplace Fairness Act, which Parliament passed in January 2025, gives the principles of fair employment the force of statute from its commencement. It prohibits discrimination on grounds that include nationality.[13] For financial institutions the practical consequence is that hiring decisions must be documented in a way that shows a fair process for local candidates.

ONE Pass and the market for top talent

At the top of the market, Singapore competes for people who could live anywhere. For them the Overseas Networks and Expertise Pass (ONE Pass) was introduced in January 2023.[14] It is a personal pass, which allows its holder to work for several companies and to change employer without a new application. Applicants must have earned a fixed monthly salary of at least S$30,000 in the twelve months before applying, with an established employer abroad, or must expect to earn that amount with an established company in Singapore. Outstanding achievements in sport, the arts or academia can replace the salary criterion. The pass is valid for five years and renewable for five years each time.[15]

From 28 January 2027 a new AI and tech track will open the ONE Pass to candidates in technology firms whose monthly remuneration of S$30,000 may include vested shares or options, provided the fixed salary is at least S$22,500. They also need at least five years in founder, executive or technical roles within the previous ten years.[16] The change shows where the state now sees the scarcest talent. For the financial centre it opens a route for the engineers and data scientists whom banks, asset managers and payment firms need to build systems based on artificial intelligence.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

Permanent residence and citizenship

Work passes are temporary. A foreign professional who wishes to settle must apply for permanent residence and, later, for citizenship. Both are granted at the discretion of the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, which takes into account the applicant's economic contribution, family ties, length of residence and integration. The state does not publish detailed criteria. The numbers granted each year are set by policy and have been kept broadly stable since the debate over the Population White Paper of 2013, which the next section describes.[17] For the financial centre the discretionary character of these decisions has a consequence. Senior foreign staff often remain on passes for many years, which ties their presence in Singapore to their employment and makes them more mobile than settled residents.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Immigration to Singapore" (accessed November 2026) and Wikipedia, "Foreign workers in Singapore" (accessed November 2026), both quoting Goh Chok Tong's National Day Rally speech of 1997: recruitment "did not extend only to top-rung prestigious positions". Wikipedia, "Immigration to Singapore" (accessed November 2026): in 1997 the Ministry of Manpower's International Talent Division launched Contact Singapore, starting with six overseas offices. ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Immigration to Singapore" (accessed November 2026): the STAR Committee formed in November 1998 to attract foreign talent; Manpower 21 followed in 1999. Wikipedia, "Foreign workers in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): the government set up on 24 July 1998 a system issuing employment passes by qualifications and salary; the P, Q, R system took effect on 1 September 1998 and an "S" type was added on 1 July 2004. ↩
3. Ministry of Manpower, "Employment Pass: Eligibility", mom.gov.sg (last updated 3 November 2026): current minimum S$5,600 for sectors other than financial services, rising with age up to S$10,700 at 45 and above; financial services S$6,200, up to S$11,800. ↩

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

4. Ministry of Manpower, “Employment Pass: Eligibility”, mom.gov.sg (last updated 3 November 2026): for new applications from 1 January 2027 and renewals of passes expiring from 1 January 2028, S$6,000 (up to S$11,500 at 45 and above) and, for financial services, S$6,600 (up to S$12,700). ↩
5. Ministry of Manpower, written answer to Parliamentary Question No. 752 (Notice Paper No. 352 of 2026) by Mr Louis Chua Kheng Wee, 12 January 2026, mom.gov.sg: EP minimum qualifying salary rose from S$5,000 to S$6,200 for financial services and from S$4,500 to S$5,600 for other sectors between 2021 and 2025. ↩
6. COMPASS applied to new EP applications from 1 September 2023 and to renewals from 1 September 2024; Ministry of Manpower announcements of March 2022 and the Committee of Supply debate 2022. The current MOM eligibility page (accessed November 2026) no longer states these dates. ↩
7. Ministry of Manpower, “Employment Pass: Eligibility”, mom.gov.sg (last updated 3 November 2026): applications “must earn 40 points to pass COMPASS”; C1 salary, C2 qualifications, C3 diversity and C4 support for local employment (up to 20 points each); C5 skills bonus (up to 20 points) and C6 strategic economic priorities bonus (10 points). ↩
8. Ministry of Manpower, “COMPASS”, mom.gov.sg/compass (accessed November 2026): C3 diversity scoring (less than 5 per cent: 20 points; 5 to less than 25 per cent: 10; 25 per cent or more: 0); C4 local PMET share relative to sector (50th percentile and above: 20; 20th to less than 50th: 10; below 20th: 0); at least 70 per cent local PMET share guarantees at least 10 points; firms with fewer than 25 PMETs receive 10 points by default. ↩
9. Ministry of Manpower, “COMPASS”, mom.gov.sg/compass (accessed November 2026): C5 skills bonus for jobs on the Shortage Occupation List (20 points where the nationality share is below one third, 10 points otherwise); candidates who needed SOL points remain restricted to that occupation and redeployment requires prior notification to MOM. ↩
10. Ministry of Manpower, “Employment Pass: Eligibility”, mom.gov.sg (last updated 3 November 2026): candidates exempt from COMPASS if they have a

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

fixed monthly salary of at least S$22,500, are applying as an overseas intra-corporate transferee or are filling the role for one month or less. ↩

11. Wikipedia, "Fair Consideration Framework" (accessed November 2026): announced on 23 September 2013; from 1 August 2014 firms had to show that they were unable to hire suitable Singapore candidates and to advertise on a jobs bank run by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency, in compliance with the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices; each advertisement open to Singaporeans and running for at least 14 calendar days; firms with a disproportionately low concentration of Singaporean PMETs compared with industry peers subject to further scrutiny. ↩
12. Ministry of Manpower, "COMPASS", mom.gov.sg/compass (accessed November 2026), referring to the Fair Consideration Framework job advertising exemption for candidates earning S$22,500 or more from 1 September 2023. ↩
13. Workplace Fairness Act 2025, passed by Parliament on 8 January 2025, applying to employers with 25 or more employees and covering nationality among the protected characteristics. ↩
14. ONE Pass introduced on 1 January 2023; announced by the Ministry of Manpower in August 2022. ↩
15. Ministry of Manpower, "Overseas Networks & Expertise Pass: Eligibility", mom.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): fixed monthly salary of at least S$30,000 over the 12 months before application, with an established overseas employer (market capitalisation of at least US$500 million or annual revenue of at least US$200 million), or prospective salary of at least S$30,000 with an established company in Singapore; outstanding achievements in sports, arts and culture or academia and research; "renewable for 5 years each time". ↩
16. Ministry of Manpower, "Overseas Networks & Expertise Pass: Eligibility", mom.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): AI and Tech track from 28 January 2027; at least S$30,000 a month for 12 consecutive months, of which the fixed monthly salary must be at least S$22,500 and the remainder may consist of vested non-cash components such as ESOPs or ESOWs; at least five

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

cumulative years as founder, C-suite member or in a technical role in the past ten years; employer a tech company, tech division or tech venture capital firm meeting a size threshold. ↩

17. Government figures since 2013: about 30,000 new permanent residents and 15,000 to 25,000 new citizens a year; National Population and Talent Division, *Population in Brief* (annual editions). ↩

Disclaimer

This article is provided for general information only. It is based on publicly available sources as at its date of publication. These sources have not been independently verified against licences, regulatory registers or the records of the entities concerned. It is not legal, tax, financial or investment advice. Nor is it a recommendation to invest in, transact with or use the services of any entity mentioned. Law and regulation change frequently, so the content may be incomplete or outdated. To the fullest extent permitted by law, Dr Alexander Ressos and the publisher of SingaporeIQ exclude all liability for loss or damage arising from the use of or reliance on this article. Readers should obtain advice on their specific circumstances before acting or refraining from action.

Names and trademarks of the entities discussed belong to their owners and are used for identification only. Their mention implies no endorsement, affiliation or allegation of wrongdoing. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. Corrections and updates: contact@ressos.com.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. This article may be quoted with attribution to SingaporeIQ (SingaporeIQ.com). Reproduction in full and any commercial use require prior written consent. The Legal Terms at https://singaporeiq.com/legal-terms apply.

Author contact: Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP · contact@ressos.com