

'Startup visa' lures expats to Shanghai

THE NATION

Marc Olivier, a 39-year-old French man, had worked in an advertising agency in Shanghai for a decade before deciding to start his own business earlier this year.

But then came the question many expats might have encountered: How would he obtain legal status a visa allowing him to stay in China while self-employed after quitting his job?

After consulting with an incubator based in Shanghai's Hongqiao area, Olivier found the answer to the question an "entrepreneurship visa", which he soon applied for and obtained in August.

The incubator, K-Tech Hongqiao International Incubation Center in Shanghai, provides working space, finance options, company registration and, more important for Olivier, visa service.

Zhu Peiyi, the managing partner of the center, said that after consultation with the Shanghai Exit-Entry Administration Bureau, the center's staff helped Olivier apply for the special residence permit for entrepreneurs.

"That's what people now call the 'entrepreneurship visa' or 'business startup visa'," Zhu said, adding that there are 20 startup companies working in the center, and one-third of them are foreign teams.

"Many foreign businessmen just didn't know that they were qualified for it, and after the news is out, many consulates have contacted us for more details," she added.

Since 2015, Shanghai has launched 25 pilot visa policies to streamline and simplify the foreigner visa application process and to diversify the visa types to better fit the demand, said Cai Baodi, chief of the foreigner visa management division at the Exit-Entry Administration Bureau.

Among the 25 pilot visa policies, four are directly linked to foreigners opening businesses in the city. These include issuing visas that allow current international students in Chinese colleges to start businesses in the Shanghai Free Trade Zone and the Zhangjiang National Innovation Demonstration Zone, and allow foreign technological specialists or college professors to commercialize their research in those areas.

Chinese-American Zhang Zheng is a professor of computer science at New York University Shanghai. Before joining the university's Shanghai campus, he was the founder of the System Research Group of Microsoft Research Asia, where he served as principal researcher and research area manager.

Since his expertise was needed by Amazon's Shanghai branch, Zhang was approached by the company to put the research into future products.

"Before, our visa policy didn't allow foreigners to hold two jobs, but ... Shanghai launched a talent visa program in May that made it possible," said Cai, from the Shanghai Exit-Entry Administration Bureau.

Zhang got his new work permit on Sept 4, which allows him to work at both NYU Shanghai and Amazon.

Besides current students and professors, graduates with a degree from the world's top 300 universities ranked by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University can get the "entrepreneurship visa" within two years of graduation to live and work in Shanghai.

Foreign entrepreneurs with a business plan and documents proving their investment and source of income can also apply.

Cai said his department has issued 95 such entrepreneurship visas in the past three years.

"We hope this kind of residence permit will encourage talent and entrepreneurs to come to the city with their innovative ideas and plans," Cai said.

Compared with a business visa, which allows the holder to stay in China no longer than six months, the permit for entrepreneurs is valid for one year with multiple entries and can be extended to a maximum of two years.

"We will soon open a center for entry-exit and immigration affairs in Zhangjiang, providing one-stop services, from language training and job hunting to legal consultation," Cai said. "It's going to be the first of its kind in the country."