

Barring Harvard international students 'trashes US soft power'

Trump's latest escalation in battle with nation's wealthiest university shows he is attempting a full-scale takeover, scholars say

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Donald Trump's move to block Harvard University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/harvard-university>) from enrolling international students is a "full-frontal attack" on the institution which will have wider ramifications for US economic strength and soft power, scholars have said.

In what is the biggest escalation yet in the president's battle with the Ivy League school – and US higher education more generally – the White House said it was "holding Harvard accountable for fostering violence and antisemitism" on campus.

"The clear signal to the rest of the sector is – we're making an example of the richest and most prestigious university in the land, so the rest of you better get in line if you want to avoid the same happening to you," Iwan Morgan, emeritus professor in the Institute of the Americas at UCL, told *Times Higher Education*.

A judge has temporarily blocked the ban after an appeal from Harvard but Morgan said if it did go ahead it would have a huge impact on foreign students wanting to go to Harvard, (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/hong-kong-university-opens-doors-harvards-foreign-students>) or indeed any US university.



Source: iStock

“What Trump is doing is to trash the beneficial cross-fertilisation arising from foreign students going to Harvard and interacting with US students.

“The academic, personal and networking linkages from this can last a lifetime. That is now in danger. More pertinently, the Trump action is a blow to US soft power throughout the world.”

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Morgan also warned that Trump has further weapons at his disposal if needed – he could tell federal agencies to investigate what Harvard teaches in a range of courses, decertify some of its programmes, and make it a place “even American faculty and students are wary of going to”.

Harvard was initially given 72 hours to cede to Trump’s demands or risk being stripped of its Student Exchange and Visitor Information System certification. Current overseas students, who make up a quarter of the institution’s student body, would be required to transfer to maintain their visa status.

Thomas Gift, associate professor of political science and director of the Centre on US Politics at UCL, said the move “removes any pretence that [Trump’s] challenges to the university are anything but an attempt at a full-scale takeover, adding that it “sends a signal to the rest of the sector that institutions need to bend to the administration’s demands or else risk harsh crackdowns”.

Dafydd Townley, a teaching fellow at the University of Portsmouth (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-portsmouth>), agreed. He said penalising the nation’s most prestigious university will make others think twice before refusing the federal government’s demands.

But those who do appease the government, as Columbia University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/columbia-university>) did, risk facing the “wrath of the student body”, he added.

“This will damage not just the US’ international reputation (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/risk-us-isolationism-canadian-academics-urged-not-travel>) as a destination for overseas students, but also its economy.

“With the threats of deportation of overseas students that protest against the federal government, the US will not be seen as a place where students will want to study.”

Inderjeet Parmar, professor of international politics at City St George’s, University of London (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/city-st-georges-university-london>), described it as “a full-frontal attack” which displays the power of the federal government and is part of an “authoritarian right-wing strategy”.

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Harvard had previously begun the sector's fightback against the Trump administration and (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/scholars-hope-harvard-defiance-spurs-wider-pushback-against-trump>) has begun legal proceedings over cuts to its federal funding – a decision that may have angered the president into pushing for ever-tougher measures.

But Parmar added: "I suspect with Donald Trump and his art of the deal philosophy, that if he felt there was weakness, then he would go even harder in on the institution, so I think Harvard probably is right to make the kind of stand that it has."

Fanta Aw, executive director and chief executive of Nafsa: Association of International Educators, called the ban an "unprecedented overreach and in direct violation of existing governmental policies".

In a statement, she added: "International students are not bargaining chips – they are scholars, researchers, and contributors to our communities whose presence strengthens US higher education and society."

"Losing international students' contributions will negatively impact domestic students' understanding of the world and have dire consequences for the country's economic strength, security, and global competitiveness. These outcomes run counter to the administration's stated goal of making America safer, stronger, and more prosperous."

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