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State Dept. Will Vet Student Visa Applicants' Social Media

International education advocates are raising concerns over the administration's decision to pause visa interviews ahead of the new policy rollout.

By Johanna Alonso



The plans to expand social media screening, first reported by *Politico*, were outlined in a memo sent by Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

John McDonnell/Getty Images

The Trump administration is planning to implement a policy that would require all student visa applicants to undergo social media vetting, according to a cable sent by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, *Politico* reported Tuesday. All new student visa interviews have been paused in preparation for the new policy.

“The Department is conducting a review of existing operations and process for screening and vetting of student and exchange visitor (F, M, J) visa applicants, and based on that review, plans to issue guidance on expanded social media vetting for all such applicants,” the memo reads, according to a copy published in full on social media by independent journalist Marisa Kabas.

The planned changes come amid the federal government’s ongoing attacks on student visa holders, which began in March with the detention of multiple students and recent graduates who had been involved in pro-Palestinian protests on their campuses. Shortly after, the administration terminated thousands of student visa holders’ records in the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System, the database that houses international students’ records, leading to a slew of legal actions from students who feared they wouldn’t be able to continue studying in the U.S.

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Most recently, the Trump administration announced last week that it would prohibit Harvard University from enrolling international students as punishment for allegedly failing to prevent antisemitism and harassment on campus during last year's pro-Palestinian encampments. Though that action was quickly blocked by a judge, the move could be devastating for the Ivy League institution, where international students make up more than a quarter of the student body.

The proposed policy would increase the amount of time, manpower and resources required to process visa applications, according to experts.

Faye Kolly, an immigration attorney based in Texas, noted that it's not unusual for immigration officials to review visa applicants' social media profiles, which they are required to list on certain immigration forms. But the administration has begun specifically screening the social media accounts of some returning students with visas who had participated in pro-Palestinian campus protests, though *Politico* reported

that State Department officials had found the guidance on how to complete those screenings vague.

It is not clear how this expanded vetting process will unfold; Rubio included no details in the memo, which said further guidance would be disseminated in the coming days.

Though the memo didn't say as much, Kolly predicted that the extra screening will involve looking "at [applicants'] social media handles more closely for what I'm assuming is going to be speech that could be considered either anti-Israel or pro-Gaza."

International education advocates have sounded the alarm on the proposed policy, arguing that it limits prospective students' right to free expression and illustrates the Trump administration's devaluation and distrust of international students.

Fanta Aw, the CEO of NAFSA, an association for international educators, told *Politico*, "The idea that the embassies have the time, the capacity and taxpayer dollars are being spent this way is very problematic. International students are not a threat to this country. If anything, they're an incredible asset to this country."

Kolly told *Inside Higher Ed* that the move harks back to the SEVIS terminations in March and April. Both actions, she said, indicate the administration's lack "of nuance ... regarding international students. It's [taking] a simplistic approach to a very complex issue. When you target international students en masse, it's irresponsible."

Daryl Bish, the president of EnglishUSA, which represents all English language programs in the country, said the change will reverse recent progress on the visa approval process and have an “immediate impact” on enrollment in English language programs.

“The extraordinary decision to pause visa interviews, under the guise of security and enhanced vetting, is a dangerous precedent that will have immediate short-term consequences,” Bish said. “Visa appointment wait times have, generally, improved since the pandemic. This means that many students apply for the visa close to their program start date. The pause in interviews, if protracted, will force these students to change their plans.”

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Elora Mukherjee, a law professor at Columbia University and the director of the law school's Immigrants' Rights Clinic, also criticized the government for pausing new student visa interviews in the interim—especially as the memo gave no indication of how long the pause might last.

“The pause is destructive to our national interests and America's reputation in the world, and its effects may be felt for years. It has thrown the lives of tens of thousands of prospective international students into turmoil and will cause chaos and disruption at colleges and universities across the country. International students have been preparing for months to join U.S. colleges and universities in the fall, and schools have been preparing to welcome them,” she wrote in an email to *Inside Higher Ed*.

“It is unclear how long the ‘pause’ will be in place, what heightened scrutiny visa applicants will face once the pause is lifted, and the extent to which decisions about granting visas may be tainted by prejudices based on race, religion, and national origin.”

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