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UNITED STATES

US expands social media vetting of student visa applicants

Mary Beth Marklein 30 May 2025

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The Trump administration appears poised to begin vetting the social media accounts of foreign students seeking to enrol in a United States university, broadening its attention beyond revoking visas already granted and deporting foreign students to denying outright entry to applicants whose views it deems unacceptable.

In a cable sent last week (Tuesday 27 May) to its embassies and consulates abroad, the US State Department halted new interviews for student visa applicants as it sets up procedures for screening their social media activity.

Visa applicants have been required to provide information about their social media accounts since 2019; last week's State Department cable said consular sections would now need to modify operations so that the accounts can be reviewed.

"Effective immediately, in preparation for an expansion of required social media screening and vetting, consulate sections should not add any additional student or exchange visitor visa appointment capacity," said the cable, first reported by *Politico* and later confirmed by other media outlets.

Previously scheduled visa interviews would be allowed to continue, and updated guidance was "anticipated in the coming days", the cable said.

Targeting online expression

At a briefing last week, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce told reporters that there's "nothing new" about its approach to visa requests.

Every country "has a right to know who's trying to come in, why they want to come in, who they are, what they've been doing and, at least hopefully, within that framework, determine what they will be doing while they're here", she said. "We will continue to use every tool we can to assess who it is that's coming here, whether they are students or otherwise."

The social media directive appears to target online expression that the Trump administration says has intensified since the Hamas terrorist attacks in October 2023.

In April, immigration officials said they would "begin considering aliens' antisemitic activity on social media", specifically mentioning



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foreign students and those “affiliated with educational institutions linked to antisemitic activity”.

In a separate announcement the day after *Politico* disclosed the student visa policy, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced a stepped-up scrutiny of applications from the People’s Republic of China and Hong Kong, saying the United States would both “aggressively revoke visas” and “revise visa criteria to enhance scrutiny of all future visa applications”.

The statement did not mention social media but emphasised concerns about applicants with connections to the Chinese Communist Party or who are studying in what it called “critical fields”.

Immediate reactions and potential impact

Reports about the cable quickly became a hot topic at the annual convention of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, which was held last week in San Diego and wrapped up on Friday.

In response to the State Department cable, conference organisers pulled together a strategy session for leaders, and informal conversations seeped into hallways and other already scheduled sessions, including one on advocacy and another on “extreme vetting”. A representative for the State Department’s consular affairs withdrew from one panel.

The State Department has, since 2019, required visa applicants to disclose their social media identifiers. But the emphasis on interview protocols is “more intense and different,” said Joann Ng Hartmann, a NAFSA senior officer who oversees the organization’s regulatory practices.

“And when you weave in the free speech [implications], that brings a whole new different element to it.”

NAFSA executive director Fanta Aw said this latest action “adds unnecessary delays, fuels uncertainty, and damages our reputation as a welcoming destination for global talent”.

She called it “another misguided and deeply troubling attack against international students” and a “poor use of taxpayer dollars”.

Lindsey Lopez, a senior director for ApplyBoard, a Canada-based company that recruits international students in partnership with universities in North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and parts of Europe, described an overall vibe of optimism.

“I think many of us are thankful that ... we’re learning this news together,” she said. “At the end of the day, many of us have been through 911, we went through the first financial crisis in 2008, we went through COVID, and now we’re going through this.”

Little was known as of 29 May about how the vetting process might work, but the suspension of interviews is, at the least, likely to create delays and some anxiety for students who were intent on applying for a visa this summer. In past years, visa decisions have peaked during the summer months, State Department data show.

Likely disruption to enrolment

In a statement, the National Association for College Admission Counseling said the new directive “could severely disrupt visa processing, hurt students preparing to enrol for fall 2025, and financially impact universities that rely on international enrolment”.

Data collected by NAFSA emphasises the benefit of international





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enrolments to local communities as well, pumping about US\$44 billion into the US economy and supporting nearly 400,000 jobs in the 2023-24 academic year.

Foreign student data are counted using several metrics. More than one million international students enrolled at US colleges and universities in the 2023 to 2024 academic year, a 7% increase from the previous year, according to information collected from universities by the nonprofit Institute of International Education. Of those, about 300,000 were enrolled for the first time.

Another report, by Boston College Professor Chris Glass, found that the number of international students in the United States declined by 11.33% between March 2024 and March 2025. That analysis is based on data from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, which is maintained by the US Office of Immigration Enforcement.

Meanwhile, US State Department data for 2024, analysed by ApplyBoard, found that the United States issued more than 400,000 F-1 visas, the most sought, which are required for full-time students at accredited institutions.

ApplyBoard's internal data suggest that the number of F-1 student visas issued so far this year is up compared with last year, Lopez said, adding that it's too soon to anticipate next steps.

"What we know is that students who already have their visa appointments are not going to be cancelled, and so we're doing everything within our power to ensure that their interviews go successfully," she said.

Trump's higher education agenda

The focus on visa applicants is the latest twist in a dizzying slew of actions and announcements that have ratcheted up the Trump administration's scrutiny of US higher education.

Until now, most of Trump's focus had targeted already-enrolled students. As of 7 May, NAFSA had tallied 1,600 incidents of arrests and similar threats affecting students, with visa holders from India, China, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria most at risk.

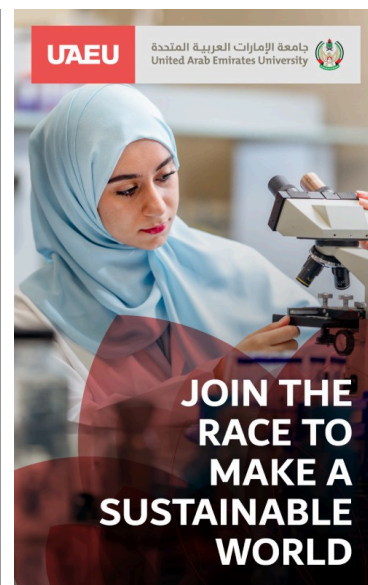
In March, Rubio estimated the department had revoked about 300 visas, including those from students and other nonimmigrant visitors, but later adjusted that figure upward to at least a thousand.

US federal courts have limited a number of Trump administration efforts to revoke university students' visas or otherwise terminate their legal status, in most cases citing constitutional concerns.

Harvard, in particular, has been in the administration's crosshairs. A federal judge last week said it would allow the university to continue enrolling international students – halting, at least temporarily, the Trump administration's efforts to remove more than a quarter of its student body, about 7,000 students, from its rolls.

Also last week, a judge ruled that a Columbia University student's detainment was likely unconstitutional; the student, who has since graduated and faces a lengthy legal battle, had organised campus protests in support of Palestinian rights.

A Tufts University doctoral student from Turkey was released from a Louisiana detention centre when a judge ruled that her right to due process and free speech had been violated. The student had contributed to an essay critical of Israel that was published in a campus student newspaper.



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Critics of the administration's actions say the attention to what applicants post online is further damaging the reputation of US higher education worldwide.

"This is another threat to crack down on free expression; immediately, it will have the harsh impact of deterring or impeding international students from attending US universities," said Jonathan Friedman, a managing director at PEN America, which advocates for free expression.

"It is yet another accelerant in the administration's effort to intimidate college and university leaders and weaken the vitality of our higher education sector," which he called "a beacon for intellectual and cultural exchange with the world".



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