

Overseas students 'vulnerable for years' if social media vetted

Students fearful of taking trips home or travelling to international events in case they are left stranded amid Donald Trump's latest crackdown

May 30, 2025

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The Trump administration's "unprecedented" proposal to vet all international students' social media could "backfire", according to scholars – by both damaging the US' global appeal and emboldening the pro-Palestinian movement it aims to quash.

All student visa interviews have been paused as the White House prepares to begin "expanded social media vetting" and screening for all prospective applicants, according to a state department cable.



Source: Chris Batson/Alamy

Alex, an international student at Stanford University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/stanford-university>) who has participated in pro-Palestinian activism, said the move appeared to be about imposing an "arbitrary ideological test", and that international students, who must periodically renew visas, apply for training placements or seek admission to graduate programmes, will remain vulnerable for years.

"Many students are now weighing whether a summer visit home, a public policy conference, or even a Twitter thread is worth the possibility of being stranded outside the United States and having their whole academic career jeopardised," Alex said.

Jonathan Zimmerman, professor of the history of education at the University of Pennsylvania (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-pennsylvania>), told *Times Higher Education* it was an "unprecedented act".

“We’ve never seen anything like this, anything that is such an explicit effort to scrutinise people’s behaviour and ideology. I think it’s fair to say that this latest effort is an attempt by the Trump administration to erode and harm the Palestinian solidarity movement.”

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The government had already targeted institutions (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/columbia-students-start-occupation-us-protests-grow>) that held large pro-Palestinian demonstrations, through the guise of its antisemitism investigations (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/trump-has-public-support-stamp-out-campus-antisemitism>), and arrested or detained thousands of politically active students in the country. (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/efforts-halt-student-deportations-risk-trump-retaliation>)

But, Zimmerman added: “It may well be that it could boomerang and backfire by creating more sympathy for the movement, even among people who don’t necessarily share all of its premises but are just outraged by the idea in a democracy of the federal government scrutinising people’s ideas in this way.”

Alex, who is a member of Stanford’s Students for Justice in Palestine group, added that an online “surveillance regime” could shift political advocacy off digital networks and into in-person events, fostering “deeper engagement” and “more resilient networks”.

Jerusha Conner, professor of education at Villanova University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/villanova-university>), warned that the proposal was a “bald attempt to suppress political speech, to intimidate and deter international student activists”.

But she said it may embolden US students – who have been reluctant of late to protest loudly against Trump (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/why-arent-us-students-protesting-against-trumps-university-attacks>) – to raise more awareness about the war in Gaza and call for institutional divestment.

Conner said the measure will cause great uncertainty among those who have already applied for the next academic year and prompt many future students to consider alternatives.

“There is little doubt that this announcement will have a chilling effect on student interest in studying in the US. It is meant not only to dissuade these students but also to hurt the US institutions that had been expecting them to enrol in the fall and pay tuition.”

The policy comes just days after President Trump attempted to block (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/barring-harvard-international-students-trashes-us-soft-power>) Harvard University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/harvard-university>)'s ability to enrol international students – the latest salvo in his battle with the Ivy League school (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/boycotts-and-lawsuits-could-help-us-universities-fight-trump>).

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New data suggests that Trump's repeated efforts to target the higher education sector are putting off overseas applicants. A survey of over 40,000 student responses from Keystone Education Group showed the US losing ground as a top study destination to rivals such as the UK. (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-universities-benefit-trump-puts-foreign-students>)

Miriam Feldblum, president and chief executive of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, said the social media vetting policy "will generate harmful delays and likely cause longer-term chaos".

"If unaddressed, this growing climate of fear, volatility, and uncertainty will weaken our nation's prosperity and competitiveness."

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