

'Onerous' four-year visas 'would deter PhD students from US'

Forcing doctoral students to extend their visas after four years could lead them to look elsewhere, experts warn

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The position of the US as a global research leader could be threatened by proposed changes to international visas, with PhD students most likely to be affected.

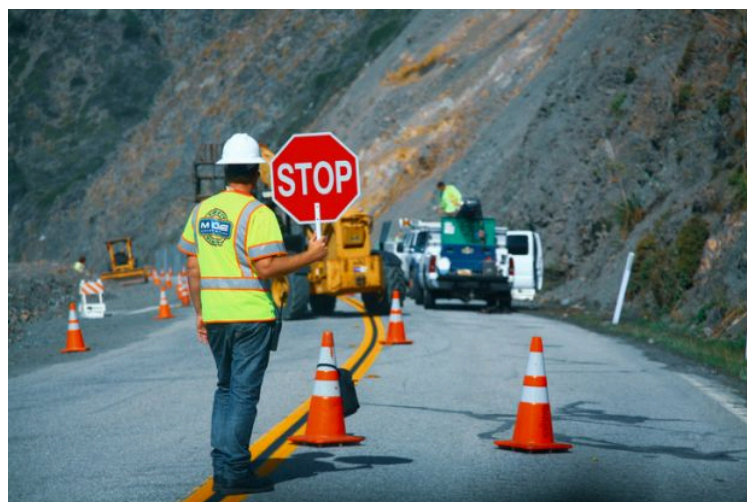
The Trump administration has mooted restricting foreign students' visas to four years, with special approval needed to stay longer.

With the average science or engineering student taking just over five and a half years to complete their PhD, most doctoral students would need to apply for a visa extension if the proposed rule takes effect.

Jacob Feldgoise, a senior data research analyst at Georgetown University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/georgetown-university>), said the policy may make the visa system more difficult to exploit, but would likely hurt the research ecosystem in the long term by creating new barriers for applicants.

"It would create more friction for the vast majority of international PhD students – individuals who are not exploiting the system and will need longer than four years to complete their programme.

"It would ride on how difficult and time intensive it is for an international PhD candidate to
ave that visa extension."



Source: iStock/Emmanuelle Firman

International students represent almost 40 per cent of science and engineering PhD graduates from US universities – and they are critically important to the development and deployment of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence.

While the US retains strong pull factors, the country is “not the only game in town” and may lose out to its rivals, said Feldgoise.

“US national security benefits when international PhD students (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/barring-harvard-international-students-trashes-us-soft-power>) attend US universities and then stay to work for US companies developing critical and emerging technologies.”

The Trump administration has also implemented a travel ban that blocks students from 19 countries from going to the US and revoked thousands of existing student visas.

(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/efforts-halt-student-deportations-risk-trump-retaliation>)

Philip Altbach, professor emeritus at Boston College (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/boston-college>)’s Centre for International Higher Education, said the four-year rule is another effort to limit international students’ access to the US.

“This is especially problematical for doctoral students, who very often take more than four years to complete their degrees,” he added.

“It is unclear how this rule might affect prospects for postdocs, a frequent career trajectory for new PhDs. This is yet another blow to America’s role as a global academic leader.”

Chris Glass, professor of the practice at Boston College (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/boston-college>), said the government was “manufacturing paperwork for itself and injecting administrative risk” for doctoral students who will be required to file extensions.

He warned that the “onerous” policy’s impact will depend on its execution. The four-year limit could become routine compliance if extensions are fast, criteria-driven, and predictable but if they are slow or opaque, it will “inject stochastic shocks that redirect R&D to more stable ecosystems”, he added.

“If extensions become friction rather than a predictable compliance step, international research...will redirect to the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada, all of which offer more stable post-study pathways.

“There are less onerous, better targeted ways to address security risks and visa overstays without disrupting doctoral training.”

On top of the federal cuts to funding (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/us-cuts-sign-things-come-trump-squeezes-funding>), Glass said the US is “inflicting avoidable harm on a dynamic research system that took decades to build”.

“The US will still attract excellent students, but flows will narrow and reroute due to a policy rooted in bureaucracy – not in addressing any genuine economic or security concern that could not have been otherwise solved with a more targeted approach.”

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