
Latitudes: The international-enrollment picture comes into focus

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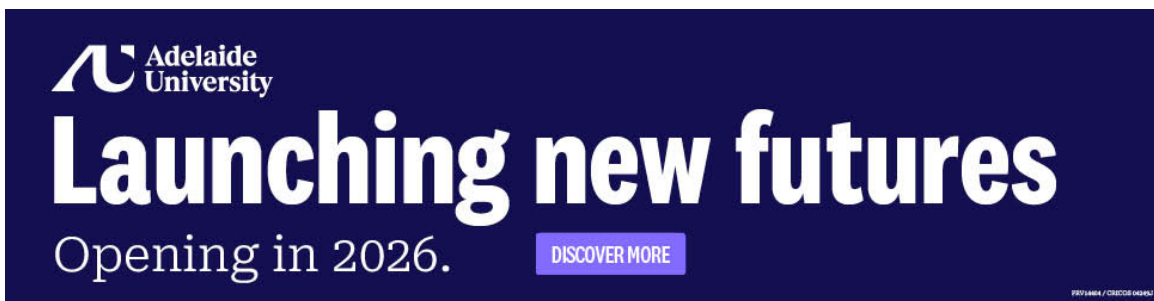
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Latitudes

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How visa backlogs affected this fall's enrollments

Now that the academic year has begun for most colleges, the international-enrollment picture is coming into focus.

A three-week suspension of visa interviews, a lack of available appointments, and added time to conduct mandatory social-media screening made this summer the most complicated since Covid for new students coming to the United States. Final student censuses will be taken and some late arrivals could still make it to campus, but it's possible to make some observations:

The areas of biggest growth were hardest hit. Foreign students pursuing master's degrees have been the [engine](#) of the post-pandemic recovery, their numbers nearly doubling. Now they appear to have been disproportionately affected by visa delays. By contrast, a number of colleges told me that their undergraduate and doctoral enrollments had held steady or had even increased this fall.

Because of the shorter length of master's and professional programs, students worry about missing out on networking opportunities or their ability to participate in optional practical training, the postgraduate work program. Self-funded master's students may also be more sensitive to economic factors, such as the impact of tariffs or the job market at home or in the United States.

The visa backlog made bad situations worse. Recent growth has been clustered geographically as well, and that concentration has compounded the congestion. The global nature of the interview freeze meant that students initially had trouble scheduling interviews in places, like Japan and Europe, that have typically been hassle-free. But the most serious and sustained problems have been in India and sub-Saharan Africa, where bottlenecks are routine. In Accra, Ghana's capital, the current wait time for a student-visa appointment is 11 months.

Students have deferred, rather than study online. Colleges have offered students who can't get visas in time the option to study online, but uptake hasn't been great. Students want both the classroom and cultural experience of being in the United States, especially given the investment they and their families have made in their education. Their pandemic experience may have also soured them on virtual learning.

Preventing international melt will be vital for colleges. It's better if students arrive late than never, so colleges are continuing to offer webinars and other support in applying for visas. To keep students engaged and feeling part of the campus community, they're also organizing virtual events, like football watch parties, and connecting them with peer mentors. Some colleges are even holding in-person meet-ups in cities with large numbers of deferred students.

But what about next year? Even as this fall's students await the green light, it's already time for admissions officers to jump into a new recruitment cycle. The new crop of students will have absorbed months of bad-news headlines about studying in America before they will even write their first college essay. In addition to visa headaches, policy changes, such as a [proposal](#) to limit the amount of time students can study here, could weaken overseas interest. Recruiters told me they'll have to promote studying at their colleges — and in the United States.

For more, read my article, “[Even as Classes Begin, Some Foreign Students Are Still in Visa Limbo.](#)”

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State Dept. requires students to apply for visas in their home countries

Students and other visitors must apply for visas in their home countries, cutting off an alternate route for those in regions with long

wait times.

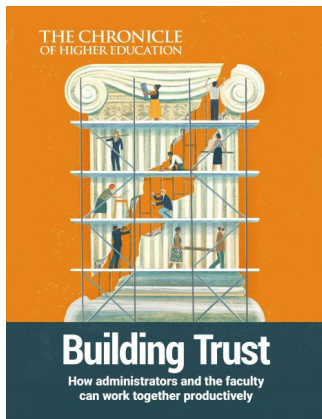
In [guidance](#) released over the weekend, the U.S. Department of State directed applicants for nonimmigrant visas to schedule appointments in the country of their nationality or residence. It also designated specific consulates for citizens of countries without routine visa services, such as Iran and Russia.

While the new requirement does not out-and-out forbid third-country applications — it uses the word “should” rather than “must” — it warns of significant delays and says that those who apply elsewhere “might find that it will be more difficult to qualify for the visa.”

The practice became more common during the pandemic, when the return to normal consular activities worldwide was uneven and visitors from some countries faced quarantine or other travel restrictions when coming to the United States. It accelerated this summer because of visa-processing backlogs, with students traveling to places, like Singapore and Vietnam, with available interview slots.

Many students cannot afford the additional costs of traveling to another country for an in-person interview, but the closing off of the third-country option could exacerbate wait times at high-volume consulates. It could also affect international students who study abroad or who try to renew their visas in nearby countries because of the expense of returning home.

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Building trust between college leaders and faculty members can be difficult even in ordinary times, but higher ed continues to face an extraordinary set of challenges. [Order this report](#) for insights on forging stronger, more productive relationships.

National-security leaders back Harvard lawsuit over foreign students

A bipartisan group of former foreign-policy and national-security officials have filed a [brief](#) supporting a [lawsuit](#) filed by Harvard University challenging the Trump administration's effort to revoke the institution's ability to enroll international students.

In their filing, the officials dispute the idea that international students represent a national-security threat, calling the administration's effort to terminate Harvard in the federal student-visa system a "retributive campaign" that is "unprecedented and dangerous."

The 21 signatories include former secretaries of state and defense, ambassadors, attorneys general, and CIA directors.

Around the globe

The U.S. Department of Education signaled that it is considering [regulatory changes](#) that would cut federal funding to colleges that don't report gifts or contracts from foreign sources. The rules would codify an [executive order](#) by President Trump.

The Pentagon supported joint research between American colleges and Chinese universities with ties to that country's military and national security, a critical congressional [report](#) concludes.

Twenty historically Black colleges have been recognized for their [leadership](#) by the Fulbright Program.

A federal judge ruled that undocumented students in [Oklahoma](#) can't qualify for lower in-state tuition rates, overturning a state law.

The British government has sent [text messages](#) to students whose visas are about to expire, warning them that bogus asylum claims will not be granted.

Education is the largest [export](#) for many British cities.

Big increases in students from mainland China are straining Hong Kong's [rental housing](#) market.

Police in Indonesia have used tear gas in an effort to break up [campus protests](#).

"Higher education has long been a target of [authoritarian censorship from abroad](#), particularly the Chinese government," a free-speech advocate said.

I talked with the [Changing Lives Through Education Abroad](#) podcast about how international education is adapting to a shifting policy and regulatory landscape.

And finally ...

Chinese universities are encouraging students to use artificial intelligence, seeing it as tool to develop critical thinking and problem solving.

Nearly all Chinese faculty members and students use AI in their work, and 60 percent use the technology several times a week, according to an [article](#) in the *MIT Technology Review*. That's in marked contrast to American higher education, where many academics are skeptical of AI and prohibit its use in the classroom.

Are you interested in the fast-evolving role of AI in teaching and learning? Then you should follow the insightful coverage of my colleague Beth McMurtrie, who is one of the authors of *The Chronicle's* weekly [Teaching newsletter](#).

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at karin.fischer@chronicle.com or message me confidentially at [Signal](#). You can also connect with me on [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Bluesky](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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