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VISAS ISSUED TO FOREIGN STUDENTS FALL, PARTLY DUE TO TRUMP IMMIGRATION POLICY

Fewer foreign students exacerbate financial challenges for some U.S. universities

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The number of visas issued to foreign students fell markedly last year amid stricter immigration policies, State Department data show, exacerbating financial challenges for some U.S. colleges and universities.

Some of the slide can be attributed to stepped-up competition from schools in other countries and less support for foreign study by some governments. But immigration attorneys and school officials say Trump administration policies are making the U.S. a tougher destination for foreigners and point to stricter scrutiny of those who do apply.

In the year ended Sept. 30, 2017, the State Department issued 393,573 student visas, known as F-1s. That was down 17 percent from the previous fiscal year and nearly 40 percent below the 2015 peak. The drop-off was particularly dramatic among Indian students this year, with a 28 percent decline in visas from the second-biggest feeder of foreign students at U.S. colleges.

There was also a big drop from China – down 24 percent last year and the No. 1 source of foreign students in the U.S. – but much of that reduction can be traced to a 2014 change in visa terms for Chinese students. Their visas are now good for five years, instead of one, meaning there are fewer visa renewals but not necessarily fewer students.

There were about 78,000 fewer visas issued in fiscal year 2017 compared with 2016 for all countries, including about 35,000 fewer from China. Setting aside visas from China, the overall drop in visas issued was 13 percent from 2016 to 2017.

Universities say international enrollments help make for a richer cultural experience for all students on campus. They also boost schools' finances amid state funding cuts; at public universities, nonresident students often pay two or three times as much as local students. Per-student funding at U.S. public colleges in fiscal 2016 was 15 percent below its 2008 level, according to the State Higher Education Executive Officers association.

At Idaho State University, tuition is \$3,583 a semester for resident undergraduate students and \$10,971 for those from outside the state.

At the same time, some Americans complain that foreigners take their spots in universities and, later, their jobs. President Donald Trump was elected on a platform vowing to protect American workers, and his administration has tightened scrutiny of employment visas and has promised to cut back a program that lets foreign students work in the U.S. immediately after graduation.

University officials, recruiters and immigration attorneys say the foreign students who apply for visas are undergoing more scrutiny than in the past.

Leon Fresco, an immigration attorney who represents several large universities, said he visited consulates across India and was told the State Department has a “renewed emphasis” on checking that students actually plan to return to their home country after graduation.

That shift is reflected in the Foreign Affairs Manual, which offers guidance to consulate officers assessing visa applications. Last year, language that was more lenient toward student applicants was removed.

The consular guides were changed as part of a review mandated by an executive order signed last year by Mr. Trump, State Department spokeswoman Ashley Garrigus said.

“The president’s mandate requires us to rigorously enforce all existing grounds of inadmissibility and to ensure subsequent compliance with related laws after admission,” she said.

While Ms. Garrigus said the “fundamental policy has not changed,” colleges say they are seeing a difference.

Todd Diacon, executive vice president and provost at Kent State University, said there was a noticeable increase in visa rejections this year. Indian enrollments this term stand at 265, compared with 1,017 in the spring of 2016.

International enrollment at the University of Houston-Clear Lake tumbled to 894 from 1,494 two years ago. Yvette Bendeck, associate vice president for enrollment management, attributed much of the drop at her school to the trouble obtaining visas, as well as concerns among prospective students that they won’t be able to get work authorization after their studies are over. Nearly 90 percent of foreign students at the school are from India and are concentrated in graduate engineering and computer-science programs.

She declined to share revenue figures but said about half of overseas students pay full freight and the school is recalibrating budgets and re-evaluating its international strategy. The campus may be slower to fill open positions to save money and is seeking to diversify its overseas recruiting targets, she said.

Foreign enrollments remain solid at some major institutions, like Arizona State University and the University of Southern California. But they fell sharply at some second- and third-tier universities, those with regional pull but not decades of international brand recognition, people in the field say.

Idaho State University had 662 international students at the end of the fall term, down from 928 last year. But much of the decline was due to the pullback in government-sponsored scholarship programs in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as trepidation by prospective students to commit to a multiyear stint in the U.S., said Scott Scholes, associate vice president for enrollment management at the university.

He estimated that at their peak, international students brought in \$20 million in tuition for Idaho State. They contribute about half that now, he said.

At the same time, other countries are providing new competition. China has invested heavily in its local institutions in recent years, pushing to keep intellectual talent close to home, while Canadian schools are reporting recruiting success. The University of Toronto enrolled 4,592 students from outside Canada this fall, up nearly 14 percent from the prior year.

“There’s greater competition from other countries,” said Jake Elsen of Navitas, a program that helps foreign students enroll in U.S. schools. He said that is “compounded by the perception that the U.S. does not value diversity.”