



US President Donald Trump has issued new immigration restrictions.

# TRUMP TO SUSPEND NEW VISAS FOR FOREIGN SCHOLARS

Latest action sows anxiety and confusion across the scientific workforce.

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**W**ith a proclamation issued on 22 June, US President Donald Trump extended and expanded immigration restrictions to limit the entry of foreign workers to the United States. The move set off ripples of alarm among scientists and drew fire from experts concerned about the future of US science.

According to the order, the United States will stop issuing certain categories of foreign-worker visa – notably, the H-1B visa given to foreign faculty members hired at universities and employees hired by tech firms – until the end of the year. The Trump administration characterized the decision as a plan to stave off the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, and to prioritize jobs for US citizens.

The freeze, which went into effect on 24 June, will not apply to people who are currently in the United States, or those with other valid documents for entering the country. It provides exemptions for some foreign workers – academics on J-1 visas, often postdoctoral researchers, should be clear, according to a senior administration official. Officers issuing visas at US consulates abroad will evaluate

petitions for other exemptions, including requests from researchers or doctors engaged in COVID-19 work.

Experts slammed the move, and argued that foreign talent is necessary to keep the US scientific enterprise competitive.

“This is a huge deal,” says Julia Phillips, a member of the US National Science Foundation’s governing board and former chief technology officer at Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Last year, the United States issued more than 188,000 H-1B visas across all sectors, according to the Department of State. A January report from the National Science Foundation said that 30% of people in science and engineering jobs in the United States were born outside the country.

## Innovation under threat

“We find it extremely concerning, particularly as medical residents are brought in on H-1B visas, and faculty who are necessary to educate the US workforce,” says Lizbet Boroughs, associate vice-president for federal relations at the Association of American Universities in Washington DC, whose members include leading US research institutions.

“The bottom line is that suspending processing for H-1B visas is going to have an impact on

American research and American innovation and America’s ability to train and teach its scientific-workforce pipeline,” she says.

For students, postdoctoral fellows and faculty members from overseas, the move adds fresh uncertainty and anxiety to an already tumultuous 2020. In April, citing economic damage from the pandemic, the administration paused the issuing of permanent-residency permits, or green cards, to people outside the United States, although it exempted medical workers. The new order extends the suspension to the end of the year, and adds new categories of visa that will be restricted.

“A lot of people are trying to figure out what this means, how they are going to be personally affected,” says Mehmet Doğan, a Turkish physicist at the University of California, Berkeley, who is part of an immigration working group at the University of California Union of Postdocs and Academic Researchers. He is awaiting an H-1B visa, but with the new rules, the path ahead is unclear.

“It is really sad that when this country has so many of the greatest research institutions in the world, greatest universities in the world, that when something like a pandemic happens, one of the first things the government does is to blame international researchers for unemployment,” Doğan says. “That’s crazy, but it’s also very sad.”

## ‘Limbo is a good term’

Lewis Bartlett, an infectious-disease ecologist at the University of Georgia in Athens, is among those trying to sort out his future. A UK citizen, he applied earlier this year for an H-1B visa to continue his work on the ecology and evolution of infectious diseases in agriculture, particularly to support US beekeeping. He is hoping to have his application approved before his current immigration approval expires. But the executive order has thrown the whole process – already delayed by the pandemic – into question. “There is a lot of uncertainty,” he says. “Limbo is a good term.”

The string of changes to immigration regulations is taking a toll on the students and postdocs who work in the laboratory of pancreatic-cancer researcher Anirban Maitra at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Most of the 14 people in the group come from outside the United States. “Every day there’s a new rule,” says Maitra. “It’s just continuous stress.”

How the rules will be applied once consulates open after pandemic-associated closures and begin processing visa applications remains to be seen. In the meantime, the new measures send a clear message, says Phillips. “You may be the most brilliant student anywhere. If you were not born in the US, there are absolutely no guarantees whether you will have any option to remain.”