



International Students Fact Sheet

Who are international students?

As a global leader in higher education, the United States has long drawn the best and brightest prospective students from around the world to its high-quality universities, colleges and vocational training institutions. Around [1 million students from 193 countries](#) come each year to study, making education a crucial American export.

The visas available to international students include **F visas** for study at accredited K-12 schools, colleges, universities, seminaries, conservators, and language training programs; **M visas** for vocational school and nonacademic programs; and **J visas** for exchange visitors, interns, professional trainees, researchers, and medical students. Spouses and minor children can join students on F-2, M-2 and J-2 visas, respectively.

International students in the U.S. face a series of challenges and restrictions both during and after their studies, causing an increasing number to choose countries with comparable educational institutions but more welcoming policies. When allowed to stay in the country, however, these highly skilled, American-trained students create significant and sustained value for the U.S. economy.

Can international students stay in the U.S. after their studies?

International students are only able to stay in the United States for the duration of status and are required to leave the country soon after their degree is completed. Many international students, however, would like to remain and work in the U.S. after they complete their studies, using their newly acquired skills and English language ability to build lives for themselves and their families. There is no guaranteed path to stay in the country, but students have a few possible options to pursue. These include using **Optional Practical Training (OPT)**, petitioning for an **H-1B** nonimmigrant visa, or applying for a **green card**.

Optional Practical Training (OPT):

Some F-1 and M-1 visa holders can use Optional Practical Training (OPT) to extend their student visas and work in the U.S. In general, students are eligible for one to three years of OPT work eligibility after graduation. OPT is the easiest way for American-trained international students to access work authorization in the U.S. In 2019, 223,000 international alumni worked in the U.S. using the OPT program. OPT, however, is limited to positions directly related to the student's coursework, and only science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) students are eligible for the full three years of work authorization. Generally, other students are limited to just one year of work authorization, and some are limited to even less time due to prior use of other work authorization programs. Any work students have performed *during* their studies reduces OPT availability after graduation. For example, a non-STEM student who has used nine months of Curricular Practical Training (CPT) to work during their studies would only be eligible for three months of OPT after graduation.

In addition to these constraints, the OPT program faces outside legal challenges, including an ongoing [suit](#) brought by Washtech, a technology workers union. Washtech originally challenged DHS’s extension of the STEM work authorization for an additional 24 months, but in 2019 the court [ruled](#) Washtech had standing to contest the legality of the entire program that has existed in some form since 1952.

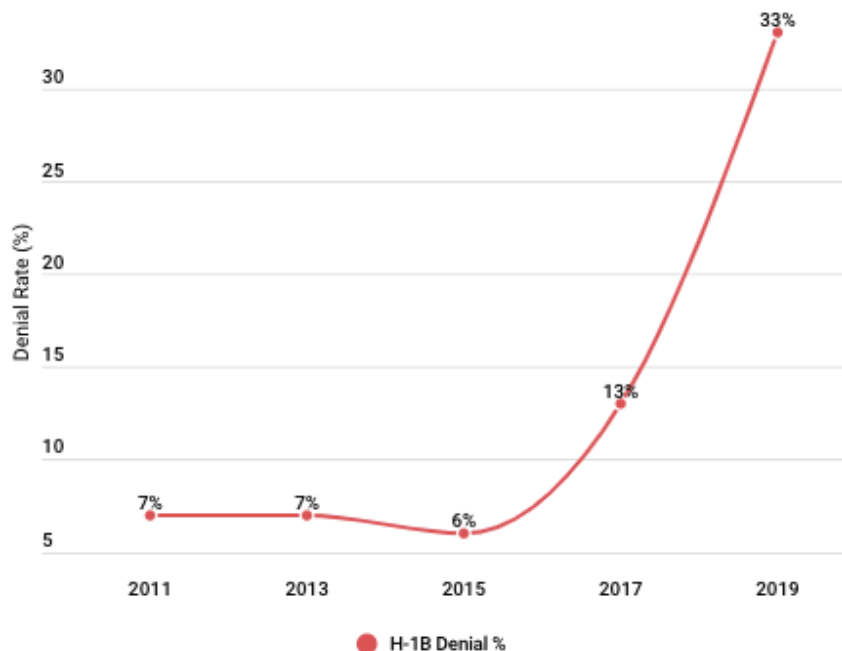
H-1B Specialty Occupation Visas:

The H-1B nonimmigrant “specialty occupation” visa is another path by which high-skilled foreign students can enter the U.S. workforce after graduation. H-1B visas are available to those with a bachelor’s degree or equivalent and who have a job offer in an occupation that requires at least a bachelor’s degree or requires application of a specialized body of knowledge. H-1B visas are three years in length and can be extended to six years, or indefinitely if an applicant has an approved green card petition but is waiting in the backlog.

But H-1Bs are numerically capped, and each year a lottery process winnows over 200,000 applicants to just 85,000 accepted. Even when meeting eligibility requirements and with an employer sponsor, a graduating international student faces low odds for receiving an H-1B visa.

Some international students face additional barriers to H-1B access. Medical students on J visas face a two year “residency requirement,” requiring them to return to their home country for two years before being able to apply for the H-1B lottery. USCIS has also put in place stricter standards for adjudicating the H-1B application itself, resulting in a [dramatic rise](#) in overall denial rates since 2015.

H-1B Denial Rates



Source: [USCIS, National Foundation for American Policy, Forbes](#)

Green Cards:

Successfully obtaining a green card is perhaps the most unlikely route for a recently graduating international student to be able to stay in America. Some do manage to obtain green cards through unique circumstances, such as marrying a U.S. citizen spouse, applying for asylum, or relying on a [close U.S. resident relative for sponsorship](#). The employment-based (EB) green cards, meanwhile, have an onerous application process and long backlogs that make many employers unwilling to sponsor graduates unless they have already been hired through the H-1B visa process.

What upcoming policy changes might affect foreign students?

A series of additional restrictions on international students have been included in the Trump administration's [regulatory agenda for 2020](#) which would make it even more challenging to be able to plan a life in America.

OPT Restrictions:

Among the changes on the regulatory agenda are further restrictions on the OPT program, although the specifics of the restrictions are not yet clear. One [proposed rule](#) would, “amend existing regulations and revise the practical training options available to nonimmigrant students on F and M visas.” The rule is estimated to be proposed in August of 2020.

Student Visa Expiration Timeline:

The 2020 regulatory agenda also includes a [proposed rule](#) that would change the expiration timeline for student visas from a “duration of status” model to a “maximum period of authorized stay” model. This change would effectively impose a time limit on student visas, as the duration of status model allows for more flexibility as long as the student is still enrolled and pursuing studies. The proposal would make it more difficult and expensive for international students to transition from one academic program to another or to take additional time to finish a degree.

Unlawful Presence:

During their coursework, international students in the U.S. must carefully follow proper procedures or risk facing 3 to 10 year re-entry bars due to accrual of over 180 days of “unlawful presence.” In general, students begin to accrue unlawful presence after receiving an official notification that they are violating the terms of their visa. However, in May 2018, USCIS released [policy guidance](#) that would begin accrual of unlawful presence before a student is officially notified, potentially resulting in long re-entry bars for students who were unaware they were violating their visas. The guidance was [blocked](#) by a federal district court judge in February 2020 while litigation continues, but it could be reissued by the administration in the form of a proposed rule or overturned in further litigation proceedings.

How does U.S. policy regarding international graduates compare to other countries with similar reputations for higher education?

The lack of a clear pipeline for international students to stay in the country and work makes the U.S. an outlier from other countries with competing educational institutions. Countries with comparable reputations for higher education [include](#) the U.K., Canada, and Germany.

In **the U.K. system**, starting in 2020, students have access to a new Post Study Work visa (PSW) to stay in the country up to two years to search for work after graduation. In general, once a graduate finds a job paying over £30,000 annually, they can move from a PSW to a Tier Two general work visa.

In **the Canadian system**, international graduates can apply for a Post Graduation Work Permit (PGWP), which is generally valid for three years. Students are allowed six months of unemployment on a PGWP and do not need an employment offer to apply. From a PGWP, international graduates can access permanent residence via the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP), Canadian Experience Class or Provincial Nominee Program.

In **the German system**, students are allowed an 18-month residence permit (RP) after they complete their degree to stay in the country and search for work. Once they find a position, international graduates with a bachelor’s or higher degree are encouraged to apply for permanent residence first via an EU Blue Card (BC), similar to a U.S. green card. International graduates can stay and work in Germany as their Blue Card application is being processed.

The **dependent spouses** of international students in the U.K., Germany and Canada are permitted work authorization throughout the student’s studies and subsequent job search. The spouses of student visa holders in the U.S. are barred from work authorization entirely.

Comparison of Welcoming Policies for International Graduates

	Leeway to Look for Work Post Grad	Initial Employment Restrictions	Access to Jobs Pipeline	Dependent Work Eligibility	Total International Students
U.K.	24 months	No	Yes (PSW → Tier 2)	Yes	485,000
Germany	18 months	No	Yes (RP → E.U. BC)	Yes	393,000
Canada	6 months	No	Yes (PGWP → FSWP)	Yes	721,000
U.S.	3 months	Yes	No (OPT → ?)	No	1,095,000

What impact do international students have on the economy?

International students attending U.S. colleges and universities [contribute](#) \$41 billion to the economy each year, making education a vital U.S. export and a significant trade surplus. They contribute [an additional](#) \$10 billion to the economy in spending outside of tuition, and are responsible for [supporting](#) over 458,000 jobs.

When allowed to stay and work after they graduate, international students add even more to our economy. The OPT program, for example, has been shown to have a [positive impact](#) on both national and local economies. The data show that OPT workers [do not significantly impact](#) the wages of workers who were already here or contribute to adverse labor market effects.

International students are also more likely to start businesses than U.S. citizens. A 1% increase in foreign college graduates [results](#) in a 15% increase in patents per capita. [Half](#) of U.S. private companies worth over \$1 billion have founders who came here first as international students.

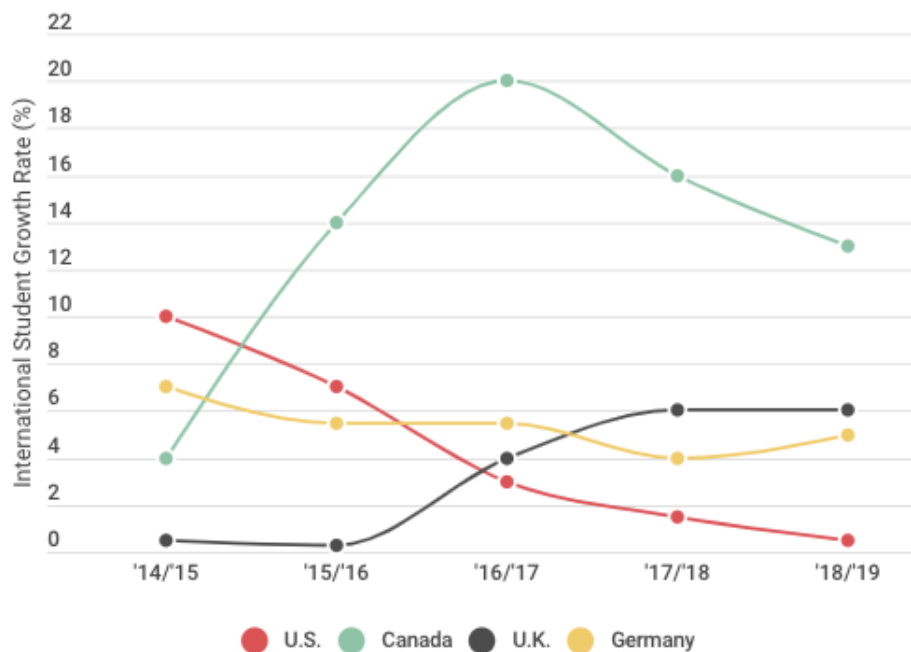
A number of international students have gone on to achieve great things in the U.S. Elon Musk, the founder of Pay Pal, Tesla, and numerous other major startups, first arrived here as an international student in 1992. Another former international student is the current [CEO of](#)

[Microsoft](#). Another [co-founded](#) Instagram. With their help, we have been able to [explore space](#) – and even [the Cloud](#). Three of the most recent U.S.-trained Nobel Laureates - Esther Duflo, Abhijit Banerjee and Donna Strickland – first entered their field of studies in America as international students.

Conclusion

The increasing number of hurdles put in front of international students in the U.S. has resulted in waning interest from the future CEOs, inventors, and researchers of the world. Total new enrollment of international students has [dropped](#) 10.4% since the 2015-2016 school year. Of U.S. admissions directors, 74% [agree](#) that recent restrictive immigration policies have made it more difficult to recruit international students. The decline in interest in studying in the U.S. has coincided with increases in enrollment in competing countries such as Canada, the U.K. and Germany. If this trend continues, it could have serious negative implications for the U.S. economy.

Growth Rate of International Student Population by Country



Sources: U.S.: [IIE](#); Canada: [CBIE](#) and [ICEF Monitor](#); Germany: [DAAD](#) and [ICEF Monitor](#), U.K.: [HESA](#)