

Why are student visas being revoked in the U.S.? | Explained

What is Trump's 'Catch and Revoke' programme? How many foreign students are enrolled in the U.S.?

Updated - April 06, 2025 06:02 am IST

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The story so far: The Trump administration has cracked down on the visas of anyone suspected of being involved in campus protests or otherwise linked, howsoever loosely, to advocating for human rights in Gaza.

What is the U.S. policy on student visas?

Addressing the student visa revocation issue, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio recently noted that nobody had a right to a U.S. visa, adding, "...We have seen on campuses across the country where students literally cannot go to school... buildings are being taken over, activities going on — this is clearly an organised movement. And if you are in this country on a student visa and are a participant in those movements, we have a right to deny your visa."

Under the aegis of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, the Secretary of State has the authority to revoke visas of foreigners deemed a threat. According to reports, U.S. immigration officials are now said to be also scrutinising new applications for academic (F), exchange (J), and vocational (M) visas, with the intention of refusing visas to those associated with such protests.

Under the second Trump administration's so-called 'Catch and Revoke' programme, Mr. Rubio noted that by March 27, the State Department had already revoked the visas of more than 300 in-country foreign

students. Reports suggest there are Indian students too on the list. There were reportedly 3,31,600 Indian students in the U.S. in the 2023-24 academic year, according to the U.S. State Department numbers. Under the 'Catch and Revoke' programme, linked to President Donald Trump signing an executive order in January to counter "anti-Semitic" movements on university campuses, the State Department is said to be using AI-assisted reviews of social media posts by foreign students to decide who among them might qualify for visa revocation followed by deportation to their country of origin.

In this context, the Trump White House has also signalled its seriousness of intent by tightening the screws in multiple spheres against major U.S. universities, including by cutting hundreds of millions of dollars in annual federal government support to Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins, among others.

How does the govt. monitor such enrolment?

According to the Migration Policy Institute, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities has experienced strong overall growth, soaring from 26,000 international students in 1949-50 to nearly 1.1 million in 2019-20. International students also increased as a share of all students enrolled in U.S. higher education: from 1% to nearly 6% during the same period.

Following the discovery that one of the 9/11 hijackers had entered the U.S. on a student visa but never attended class, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) was set up in 2003 to "collect, maintain, and manage information about all foreign students and exchange visitors" in the country. To this date, SEVIS requires all schools to "submit and regularly update student information in a central database that can be accessed by the government; students who do not appear or who stop attending classes can have their visas revoked and face deportation." In this context, the list of universities at which foreign students have had their visas revoked is long and growing. Besides the above, it includes Arizona State, Georgetown University, University of Minnesota, Cornell etc.

What are the challenges to the policy?

The question of legal remedies is a complex one in this case given that the present immigration enforcement action is not directed against U.S. citizens but against foreigners.

Nevertheless, last week the American Civil Liberties Union published an open letter asking universities to stand up to federal government pressure including surveillance or threats to international students and faculty. The group of academics noted that the protests were defined as protected free speech and assembly, guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment. Additionally, the American Association of University Professors and the Middle East Studies Association are reported to have filed

lawsuits against the Trump administration, arguing that targeting students based on their views is unconstitutional and detrimental to academic freedom. Despite this, comments by Mr. Rubio suggest that unless challenged in court, the revocation programme could continue for the foreseeable future.

Published - April 06, 2025 03:10 am IST