

Welcoming the best and the brightest from everywhere

The US State Department promises to accelerate the visa process for foreign graduate students and postdoctoral researchers. That will be a welcome change.

How many times have you heard complaints from colleagues or meeting organizers about researchers who, in trying to obtain or renew visas, have dealt with exceedingly long delays, in some cases as long as several months? As a result, some scientists who left the United States to renew a visa have been left stranded, whereas others have been unable to travel to the United States for work or to attend scientific meetings.

This situation now looks as though it will improve, according to the US State Department. The aim is to eventually have routine requests dealt with in 2 weeks, said a State Department spokesperson.

The visa process became problematic after 9/11, with the implementation of a program known as Visa Mantis. Visa Mantis is a security review procedure involving multiple US government agencies that is supposed to identify visa applicants who could threaten US national security by illegally transferring sensitive technology. Visa applicants from China (more than half of the total), Russia and Ukraine account for the majority of Visa Mantis security reviews, according to a US Government Accountability Office report. More specifically, the process is meant to “prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their missile delivery systems; restrain the development of destabilizing conventional military capabilities in certain regions of the world; prevent the transfer of arms and sensitive dual-use items to terrorists and states that sponsor terrorism; and maintain U.S. advantages in certain militarily critical technologies.”

All laudable objectives; however, the process has become very lengthy.

In 2003, independent government investigators found that, on average, special checks took 75 days to complete, compared with the 24-hour period for most nonimmigrant visa applicants who are eligible to enter the United States. By the end of 2004, the wait time for Visa Mantis applicants was reduced to about 15 days, after pressure from Congress.

But significant delays have risen again over the past year. “By the end of 2008, the average delay for applicants from China had climbed to 4 months,” says an official with the US National Academies.

According to the State Department, more staff have been hired, and procedural modifications were put in place in early June of this year that will allow foreign science and technology professionals who apply for US visas to receive approval within 2 weeks.

Let’s hope so. After all, this affects science at all levels—graduate students, postdocs and professors, who could come here to study or

work in academia or industry. In addition, the participation of these researchers in scientific conferences in the United States has suffered.

This is not just an issue of fairness. It also speaks to the kind of message we are sending to the rest of the world: that America no longer welcomes the best international students seeking an advanced degree. Nor is it the place to stay once you have that degree.

“Highly skilled foreign national students used to come to the U.S. to study and stay. They start innovative companies that employ millions or used their engineering and science skills to benefit U.S. companies. Many now believe there are better future prospects in their own countries,” said Robert E. Litan, Vice President of Research and Policy at the Kauffman Foundation. “Policymakers are misguided if they believe these talented next-generation entrepreneurs and innovators threaten U.S. jobs. They, in fact, offer the promise of more jobs by building successful, high-growth companies—either in their own businesses or those for which they work.”

The study “Losing the world’s best and brightest: America’s New Immigrant Entrepreneurs, Part V” by Vivek Wadhwa, a senior research associate at the Labor & Worklife Program at Harvard Law School and executive in residence at Duke University, surveyed 1,224 foreign nationals who are currently studying in institutions of higher learning in the United States or who had graduated by the end of the 2008 academic school year. The survey consisted of responses from 229 students from China and Hong Kong, 117 students from Western Europe and 878 students from India.

“What many people do not realize is that these foreign nationals are making a job, not taking a job,” said Wadhwa. “According to research by the National Science Foundation, foreign students received more than 60% of all engineering doctorates and more than half of all science and mathematics doctorates awarded in the United States. That’s a lot of talent to lose to other countries.”

According to the study, 55% of Indian, 40% of Chinese and 30% of European students said they want to return home within 5 years. This is a dramatic reversal from previous retention rates. In the past, more than 75% of Indian and Chinese students who received science and engineering advanced degrees in the United States remained in the country for extended periods or permanently.

We must continue to attract and retain the best and the brightest from all over the world if we are going to retain America’s global competitiveness, and reducing visa-processing delays is definitely a step in the right direction. If we don’t, America’s loss will be the rest of the world’s gain. ■