nature materials Vol. 3 No. 2 February 2004 www.nature.com/naturematerials

US visas: Postdocs in peril

Almost any scientist who has travelled to the US since 11 September 2001 has noticed an attitude change at America's borders. Researchers who could once obtain a visa in an afternoon must now endure face-to-face interviews and background checks that can take weeks or even months. The delays have caused trouble for everyone one from undergraduates to research ministers, but setbacks for one group in particular could spell trouble for materials scientists — the postdocs.

Foreign postdocs are an essential part of the US workforce, accounting for roughly half of all postdoctoral positions in the physical sciences, according to Irving Lerch, director of International Affairs at the American Physical Society in College Park, Maryland. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these postdocs have been experiencing more than their fair share of post-September 11 holdups. Their young age, interest in scientific fields and intent to make extended, temporary trips to the US raise the guard of American officials. Additionally, many postdocs come from India, China and countries in Eastern Europe — places where application volumes are high and security checks frequent. And not all the delays are for first-time visitors. Many young researchers who leave the US to attend conferences or return home for personal reasons have found themselves suddenly stranded outside the country. In particular, foreign graduate students who leave the country in the hopes of returning as postdocs, or postdocs who take trips home between positions, have found themselves shut out of the US for extended periods of time.

Although it is nearly impossible to gather accurate statistics on this small subset of visa applicants, there are some hints as to the size of the problem: A survey of over 300 schools released in November of 2003 showed that delays for 'scholars' — a broad category that is dominated by young postdoctoral researchers — were up 76% in the autumn. Researchers in the physical sciences, biological sciences, or engineering made up 93% of those experiencing significant delays (www.nafsa.org/content/ PublicPolicy/ForTheMedia/nafsasurveyhighlights1103.pdf).

GETTING A VISA HAS BECOME MORE COMPLEX FOR POST-DOCS COMING INTO THE US.

The long-term effects of these new policies on postdocs, and other aspects of research, are difficult to gauge. As an article in the 15 January issue of *Nature* (**227**, 190–195; 2004) points out, delays and denials for foreigners hoping to pursue science in America have contributed to a dramatic rise in the number of students and scholars working in countries such as the UK, Australia and Canada. But the fact remains that about 40% of the world's research dollars are still spent inside the United States, which is home to far more research institutions than any of its rivals.

In the here and now, there are a few simple things that researchers can do to help postdocs coming into the US. The first is to take the delays into account when trying to bring a new postdoc into the country. Senior scientists must be sure to give postdoctoral researchers several months to arrive at their institution. They should talk to the international service office at their college or university to make sure that the visiting researcher has all the necessary paperwork in hand. If it becomes clear that there is a delay, they may want to try and seek help from organizations such as the American Physical Society or the National Academy of Sciences, both of which are working with the State Department to bring researchers into the country.

Persistence is the key for postdocs trying to make their way in, or back, to the US. Delays are common, as are initial denials of visas in some countries, but many researchers can obtain a visa sooner or later. Stories of lengthy delays abound, but State Department officials claim that although there were significant delays in 2002 and some of 2003, most scientists should now be able to obtain their visas within a month. And new computerized systems, to be installed this spring, is likely to speed the process even further. Lengthy and seemingly arbitrary hold-ups can be frustrating to a young researcher at the beginning of his or her career, but they need not be showstoppers.