# International students face growing uncertainty and fear at Harvard amid federal visa crackdowns



Since the inauguration of President Donald Trump, international students attending U.S. universities have experienced heightened uncertainty and apprehension, particularly at prestigious institutions such as Harvard University. The Republican (Springfield) reports that students like Harvard sophomore Abdullah Shahid Sial from Pakistan are navigating an environment fraught with fears about their visa status and ability to remain on campus.

Shahid Sial, who serves as co-president of Harvard’s undergraduate student body, describes the precautions he takes daily: carrying his passport and identification at all times in case of sudden visa revocation or termination of his Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) status. He has also pre-emptively arranged legal representation and emergency communication plans in the event of detention by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Reflecting on the atmosphere on campus, Shahid Sial said, “The fact that you only have one of me right now and not many international students in front of you, willing to speak, is a big testament to how frightened people are to speak up in this environment. It’s a level which I haven’t seen before, ever.”

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has intensified scrutiny of international students at Harvard and hundreds of other institutions by revoking student visas and terminating SEVIS statuses. Harvard has been ordered to submit detailed records concerning alleged “illegal and violent activities” by foreign students before the end of the month, or face losing a crucial certification under the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). This certification is essential as it permits universities to legally enrol international students.

International students make up approximately 27% of Harvard’s undergraduate and graduate population, according to 2024 to 2025 data. Massachusetts, where Harvard is located, hosts over 82,000 international students—the fourth highest in the nation following Texas, New York, and California—comprising nearly one in five of the state's college students. The contribution of international students to the U.S. economy is substantial, with the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) estimating a $43.8 billion impact in the 2023-2024 academic year alone.

Experts warn that the current federal actions could have wide-reaching effects on higher education enrolment and the economic vitality of colleges. Massachusetts has already seen closures of more than two dozen colleges, including Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, which is closing due to financial difficulties, and Bard College at Simon’s Rock, announcing the closure of its Great Barrington campus amidst declining enrolment figures. Luc Schuster, executive director of the research group Boston Indicators, noted, “There is a real risk that that problem [the demographic decline] is exacerbated by declining numbers of international students coming if it becomes much harder to get a student visa to come here from abroad.”

The decline in college enrolments is partly attributed to the “demographic cliff,” a term describing a projected decrease in the number of traditionally college-aged students in the U.S., expected to peak in 2026 for Massachusetts before steadily falling through 2041. This decline is linked to lower birth rates since the Great Recession of 2008.

In response to these demographic and enrolment challenges, many universities, including those in Massachusetts, have actively recruited international students, who are often full-paying and do not generally receive financial aid. Lynn Pasquerella, president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities and former president of Mount Holyoke College, said, “When we look at alternative sources of revenue apart from the traditional domestic students, campus leaders are looking at recruiting international students who often are full-pay students.”

The impact of the federal government’s approach on international students is felt on campuses beyond Harvard. David Fithian, president of Clark University in Massachusetts, which has an international student body of about 35%, expressed concerns about the chilling effect on enrolment: “We’re already hearing from students who are uncertain about coming to the United States to start their education... students already here, they’re obviously deeply concerned about their ability to stay, their ability to travel home and return and their ability to continue to study the subjects that they came to study and the right we all enjoy to speak freely about world matters.”

The uncertainty also influences students' decisions about their education pathways. Shahid Sial mentioned growing conversations among peers about transferring to universities in countries like the U.K. and Canada, citing the insecurity surrounding the visa situation at Harvard. “Harvard is Harvard because, again, it has the ability to get the best people from around the world. If that is threatened, then Harvard is not Harvard anymore,” he said.

The federal government’s threat to revoke Harvard’s SEVP certification, a rare and severe step typically reserved for cases involving fraud, raises alarms in the higher education community. Sarah Spreitzer from the American Council on Education described the ongoing scrutiny as “an all-out government attack on Harvard.” Losing this certification would restrict Harvard’s ability to admit international students and could jeopardise the academic freedom typically associated with the institution. Spreitzer referenced past examples such as Herguan University in California, which lost its certification in 2016 after fraud was uncovered.

This unprecedented level of federal intervention and the associated climate of fear are causing deep concern among education leaders. Pasquerella voiced these worries succinctly: “My fears are that this continued governmental overreach will upend the strength of American higher education.”

As international students grapple with increasing uncertainty, the implications extend beyond individual campuses, potentially affecting the broader higher education landscape and the regional economy in Massachusetts and beyond. The integration of international students into the local economy, through education and eventual workforce participation, has historically contributed significantly to innovation and economic growth. The current challenges pose complex questions for institutions, students, and policymakers alike.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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