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Visa interviews for international students set to open, subject to review of social media accounts

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Visa interviews for international students (those seeking a F-visa or M-visa) and those aspiring to visit US on an exchange visa (J visa) is set to open, but the news is mixed.

The new requirement by the US Department of State (DOS) is that all applicants must make their social media accounts open for government review. In late May, DOS had paused consulate visa interviews for these categories of applicants to enable introduction and implementation of enhanced social media screening and vetting processes.

A tersely worded statement, issued late night on Wednesday, by DOS states, “We use all available information in our visa screening and vetting to identify visa applicants who are inadmissible to the

US, including those who pose a threat to US national security. Under new guidance, we will conduct a comprehensive and thorough vetting, including online presence, of all student and exchange visitor applicants in the F, M, and J non-immigrant classifications. To facilitate this vetting, all applicants for F, M, and J non-immigrant visas will be instructed to adjust the privacy settings on all of their social media profiles to public”.

Several federal agencies under the Trump administration are issuing constant reminders that “A US visa is a privilege, not a right,” – these words and the concern about ‘national security’ echo throughout this statement. “The US must be vigilant during the visa issuance process to ensure that those applying for admission into the US do not intend to harm Americans and our national interests, and that all applicants credibly establish their eligibility for the visa sought, including that they intend to engage in activities consistent with the terms for their

admission,” adds the statement.

It may be recalled that in mid-March, Ranjani Srinivasan, an Indian PhD student at Columbia University, self-deported to Canada after her US student visa was revoked due to alleged campus activism. The subsequent weeks saw hundreds of F-1 visas and/or SEVIS records being revoked for a multitude of reasons including campus activism, some reasons were as trifling as a traffic violation. Several US district courts have granted temporary injunctions to international students against such revocations.

In April, as was duly reported by TOI, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) stated that the agency will “begin considering aliens’ antisemitic activity on social media and the physical harassment of Jewish individuals as grounds for denying immigration benefit requests. This will immediately affect aliens applying for lawful permanent resident status, foreign students and aliens affiliated with educational institutions linked to antisemitic activity.”

Given that this course of action existed, the pause on the issue of international student visas had taken the student community by surprise. According to immigration attorneys the need to have social media accounts ‘public’ is the marked difference.

Given the past actions of the US authorities, a student from Pune, who was aspiring to study in the US had deleted all her social media accounts. “My immigration attorney has now told me that even the lack of a social media presence could be held against me – it could indicate that I had things to hide,” she told TOI.

Rajiv S Khanna, managing attorney at Immigration.com told TOI, “All foreign students and scholars applying for F, M and J visas will need to ensure their social media accounts are public for review. Consular officers will screen for ‘hostility’ toward US citizens, culture, government, or institutions. There is absolutely no guidance on what these ‘hostility indicators’ mean or to what extent the US government will go to determine hostility. This vague criteria creates uncertainty for applicants and raises questions about consistency and fairness in the visa application review process.”

New York based Cyrus Mehta, founder of an immigration law firm added, “This is so very authoritarian and even creepy, and it is aimed at stifling all forms of critical speech that is integral to a student's education.”

According to a recent report released by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), there were 15.8 lakh international students in the US during 2024, with the Indian contingent of nearly 4.2 lakh students being the largest. However, recent trends have shown a decline in interest in studying in the US.