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UNITED STATES

HE bodies fear ‘troubling’ impact of immigration fee plans

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The American Council on Education (ACE) and seven other higher education associations have warned that the Trump administration’s proposed increases in immigration fees would “reinforce a troubling message” that the United States no longer welcomes members of the international community to its campuses.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced the increases in November and **Ken Cuccinelli**, acting director of USCIS, said they were needed to “ensure more applicants cover the true cost of their applications” including “in-depth screening” and minimise subsidies from an “already over-extended system”.

But in a **joint response to the proposals** on 23 December and signed on behalf of all of the associations, Ted Mitchell, president of ACE, said: “We believe the proposed fees are excessive, burdensome and will adversely impact students, faculty and institutions of higher education.”

Overall, visa fees would increase by 21%, “without any evidence that the additional revenue generated will be used to reverse the ongoing slowdown in processing,” Mitchell said, and warned that the increases, along with the more hostile environment created through other visa-related policies brought in by the administration, would “exacerbate a downward trend in international student enrolment”.

Specifically, the associations raised concerns over the extension of premium processing; the new fee associated with the renewal for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); the 20% increase for the I-765 application for employment authorisation for students applying for optional practical training (OPT); and the transfer of funds from the Immigration Examinations Fee Account to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Mitchell said US colleges and universities are part of a worldwide network of learning, research and education and their institutions enrol millions of students from all over the world in undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programmes.

Many of these students and scholars have gone on to invent groundbreaking technology, start thriving businesses and create jobs, he said, adding that the more than one million international students who currently attend US colleges and universities add to the United States’ intellectual and cultural vibrancy, while also yielding an estimated economic impact of US\$41 billion and support for over 450,000 US jobs.

“These proposed fees, along with a broader shift in tone and visa-related policies proposed by the administration, reinforce a troubling message that we no longer welcome members of the international community who wish to study at American campuses,” he said.



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'Far-reaching adverse impact'

"The significant increases and new fees proposed will undoubtedly hinder American higher education's mission of global engagement, which would have a far-reaching, unintended adverse impact on our institutions and America.

"We must remain a welcoming country to international students, scholars, scientists and researchers who enrich our campuses and the country with their talents and skills."

Mitchell said the most recent *Open Doors* report, **published** by the Institute of International Education, found that new international enrolment in the 2018-19 academic year fell by 1.5% for undergraduate students, and overall international enrolment has slowed, with an increase of only 0.05%. Notably, the 0.05% increase was due to the increased number of students participating in the OPT programme, which grew by 9.6%.

"As proposed, these significant and seemingly arbitrary fee increases could impact our ability to attract and retain international students and scholars," he said.

He said this was especially concerning given that under the proposed rule, the length for premium processing will extend from 15 days to 15 business days.

"More and more of our institutions, as well as our international scholars and faculty, are depending on premium processing given the delays we have seen with normal processing times," they said.

They are also very concerned about the creation of a new fee for renewals of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or 'Dreamers' for US\$275, when previously there was no fee for the renewal of DACA status. There is also an increase to the employment authorisation fee of US\$80, thereby increasing the total amount for a DACA renewal from US\$495 to US\$765, a 55% increase for a person seeking DACA renewal.

This comes at a time when DACA enrollees face uncertainty over the outcome of a Supreme Court review of the programme and many DACA participants are working to renew their DACA status.

In addition, the I-765 Application for Employment Authorisation fee would be increased by 20% to US\$490.

The summer of 2019 saw processing times for I-765 forms for OPT jump from three to five months. International students cannot apply for employment authorisation until they are three months from the start date of their job. Given the wait time of over five months, employers therefore had to wait an additional two months or more for students to join their programmes.

"This resulted in international students delaying employment offers or giving up and returning to their home countries without completing OPT, effectively undermining the programme," the associations said.

"American higher education's mission of global engagement cannot be achieved if our immigration and visa policies no longer send a welcoming message to students and scholars from around the world," Mitchell said.

He said the associations were eager to work with the immigration services "to help sustain efforts to protect our national security while simultaneously ensuring that our institutions of higher education continue to be the destinations of choice for the world's most talented students and scholars".

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