



International students and post-study work opportunities in the U.S.: Necessary but vulnerable

Rajika Bhandari

April 2022

Countries that are top destinations for international students are able to attract global talent primarily due to a high-quality postsecondary education system, but also because of the availability of [valuable post-study opportunities](#) to gain practical training and professional experience. Such opportunities are critical for international students as a way to engage in experiential learning related to their academics, but also provide students with initial exposure to working in the host country. In the U.S., Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a post-study program [that since the 1950s](#) has provided such opportunities for international students, and has also been a key channel through which highly skilled immigrants contribute to American higher education and economic growth. OPT offers temporary employment authorization to international students in the United States, allowing eligible students and recent graduates to gain valuable practical training experience within their field of study and ranging in duration from one to three years. According to the [Open Doors report](#), in 2020/21 there were 203,885 international students, or 22.3 percent of the total international student population in the U.S., pursuing OPT.

In recent years, [numerous studies](#) and [analyses](#) have demonstrated the importance of protecting and strengthening the OPT program, ideally through congressional action. However, despite its value as a program that is mutually beneficial for the U.S.--including its colleges and universities, businesses, organizations, and the wider economy--as well as for international students, OPT remains vulnerable to legal challenges. This post examines recent developments related to OPT and their potential impact on U.S. higher education institutions and students.

A Year of Volatility

In 2021 alone, there were a number of developments affecting OPT, including: the pandemic's impact on OPT placements; lengthy processing delays for Employment Authorization Documents (EADs); court challenges to the program (and the subsequent dismissal of a case challenging OPT's validity); and a new proposal by USCIS to issue a rule in May 2022 that would increase EAD application fees. With over 20 percent of international students participating in OPT, these sorts of changes could have significant implications for a substantial number of international students. Significant fee increases, in particular, could create an



additional burden for some students. For instance, even though a recently announced [USCIS rule expands premium processing](#) to include OPT, this [well-intentioned effort](#) to speed up OPT approvals might further disadvantage certain international students who are unable to afford the additional \$1,500 fee and might therefore continue to face processing delays and the prospect of a lost OPT opportunity. A solution is needed to ensure equitable opportunity for all international students to avail of OPT, not just those who have substantial resources, either of their own or of an employer.

Importantly, by providing a critical practical learning experience upon graduation, OPT provides an essential stepping stone on the rocky path for many international students toward permanent employment and residency in the United States. However, because our immigration policies have not been updated in decades, the United States continues to lose talent due to obsolete policies that fail to account for how the world's talented students and professionals make decisions about their future, or the shifting demographic reality of the U.S. which will need this global talent to offset a [stagnating domestic population](#).

Canada is a case in point. Due in part to the ease of gaining temporary visas and permanent residence in the country after graduating, international student enrollment increased 52% at Canadian colleges and universities in the three years prior to the pandemic (2016-2019), [according to a recent analysis](#). During the same time, international enrollment at U.S. institutions dropped by 7%. The flows from India to both countries are particularly worth noting: while international students from India studying in Canada increased 182% between 2016 and 2019, Indian students at the master's level in STEM fields fell by almost 40% at U.S. institutions. The report cites additional analysis by the [Congressional Research Service](#) which estimates that it could take up to 195 years for the current green card backlog for Indian nationals to be cleared and for them to receive an employment-based green card enabling them to reside and work in the U.S. permanently. Yet research continues to show that despite these inordinate delays, there is [continued and strong interest](#) amongst international graduates in the U.S.--and not just those from India--in staying and working in the U.S., especially in the STEM fields.

Potential Impact on U.S. Campuses

To shed more light on these issues and to better understand how campuses are reacting to this shifting landscape of OPT and multiple changes, the [Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#) conducted a quick poll of up to 20 U.S. institutions, including Presidents' Alliance institutional members, drawn from a combination of top hosts of international students and HBCUs. While by no means a comprehensive or rigorous survey of the higher education sector, the findings nonetheless provide a snapshot of how institutions are reacting to these shifts around OPT. Additionally, this snapshot comes just over a year since the new



administration took office, and is an appropriate point in time to examine key policy developments that impact international students.

- **The majority of polled institutions reported changes in OPT participation in 2021.**

Reasons ranged from an overall decline in international students (resulting in a smaller pool of students eligible for OPT); fewer students choosing to apply for OPT; students

Some students (esp May 2021 grads) who had traveled out of the US at the beginning of the pandemic elected to complete their degrees from abroad and not return to the US. Students from some of our more represented areas (China and Europe) wanted to apply for OPT but were unable to return to the US due to country-specific travel bans.

not being able to return to the U.S. due to a variety of reasons and hence forfeiting the opportunity to undertake OPT; and students choosing to return home or pursue graduate school instead of participating in the OPT

program.

- There is wide consensus that **OPT is a critical factor in attracting international students** to U.S. colleges and universities.
- All agreed that **the multiple changes and developments surrounding OPT over the past year will have a negative impact on OPT**, including affecting students' post graduation and professional planning, particularly for those students for whom fee increases pose financial challenges. Another response indicated that while it might not necessarily make obtaining OPT more difficult for international students, it would certainly "make studying in the U.S. less appealing."

It could have a negative impact on enrollment as it may make the US seem less welcoming to international students. It may also increase the number of requests that we receive for fee assistance from higher needs students.

Prospective students already see other countries or staying home as a viable options. Additional fees might not be a financial barrier for some, but becomes part of an overall negative climate in which students and families see better options elsewhere.

- In particular, **an increase in OPT application fees borne by students might have a negative effect and even a ripple effect.** Even in situations where students' OPT fees are covered by another source or sponsor, an increase in fees might serve as a disincentive for sponsors to support international students in the first place.

- There was agreement across the board—without exception—that the



proposed changes would **disproportionately affect international students from the Global South** who often tend to be from lower income countries.

- **Timely processing of OPT applications** remains a concern for about half of the polled institutions, with the remaining half indicating either that it was not a concern or that they were uncertain of the situation. While timely OPT processing has been reported by institutions recently, there is concern that processing will slow down considerably in spring and early summer, when applications increase and timely processing is most needed by students and graduates. The inclusion of OPT applications for premium processing is welcomed, but the \$1,500 cost poses other barriers, as discussed earlier.

Curricular Practical Training (CPT): An Under-utilized Resource?

With experiential learning and internships becoming increasingly critical and an indispensable component of any academic program, we also asked institutions about the number of international students pursuing a full range of practical training opportunities, including Curricular Practical Training (CPT), pre- and post-completion OPT, and STEM extension OPT. The goal was to understand the interplay between these related but also distinct opportunities, and to get a sense for how institutions leverage these opportunities to offer meaningful academic and practical learning experiences for their international students.

While it was not possible to arrive as a conclusive finding, it is clear that this remains a gray area that requires further research. For one, it is not clear whether institutions are offering CPT and OPT as distinct opportunities, reserving the latter for post-study work experiences for which they are primarily intended. Second, an unexamined question is whether CPT's narrowly defined linkage to academic coursework is too restrictive and fails to take into account the changing nature of higher education and employment. Does CPT need to be modernized and reconceptualized to ensure that opportunities for experiential learning are connected to workforce development and training?

Key Takeaways

This quick snapshot poll reveals that changes that in any way make OPT less accessible to international students—whether through increased fees, or other measures—will likely have the unintended consequence of dissuading prospective students from applying to U.S. campuses, especially at a time when future students are already beginning to [reassess their options](#). Further, the potential negative impact would be felt most by students from less resourced countries or the Global South, further reducing the diversity of international students who are able to study in the U.S.



Note that our poll was conducted just before [the expansion of STEM-related OPT to additional fields of study](#) was announced by the U.S. government, and hence does not reflect this development. Although this change is a step in the right direction of allowing more international students to benefit from an extended period of OPT, it still does not change the fact that the program remains vulnerable and that congressional action affirming its legitimacy would be an important step.

Ultimately, this poll reveals that although data exist on the participation of international students in OPT, far less is known about the institutional context within which such experiences occur and more research is needed to fully understand the role that all forms of experiential learning offered to international students play in attracting international students at the outset. This is an area that the Presidents' Alliance hopes to explore in the future.

Read more about OPT:

[5 things to know about Optional Practical Training \(OPT\) for international students](#)

[Optional Practical Training: A key driver to study in the United States](#)

[Amicus Brief in support of OPT](#)

USCIS guidance on [OPT](#) and [CPT](#)

[An international student's personal account of navigating OPT](#)