

Uncertainty for Indian students as Harvard loses right to enrol foreigners, sues US government

Devina Sengupta , Neha Joshi | 5 min read | 24 May 2025, 05:30 AM IST



Harvard University has sued the US administration in the district court of Massachusetts. (Bloomberg)

SUMMARY

Department of Homeland Security secretary Kristi Noem issued a stern warning to all universities, asserting that enrolling foreign students was a privilege, not a right. The order directly affects more than 788 Indian students currently studying at Harvard.

The simmering standoff between the US government and the storied Harvard University boiled over on Thursday (Friday morning India time) when the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) revoked the university's certification to admit foreign students for the 2025-26 academic year.

DHS Secretary Kristi Noem issued a stern warning to all universities, asserting that enrolling foreign students is a privilege, not a right. "Harvard had plenty of opportunities to do the right thing. It refused. They have lost their Student and Exchange Visitor Program certification as a result of their failure to adhere to the law. Let this serve as a warning to all universities and academic institutions across the country," Noem stated.

The order directly impacts more than 788 Indian students studying in Harvard as of now, part of more than 7,000 international students who will see their student visas impacted.

Also read: [Jumping jobs? A Supreme Court judgement just made it tough, for freshers](#)

Harvard promptly sued the US administration in the district court of Massachusetts. In a late night (India time) development, the district court judge blocked the order, signalling temporary relief for thousands of students.

Responding to a *Mint* query, the university's spokesperson pointed to its court filing.

"Effective immediately, most of Harvard's thousands of enrolled F-1 and J-1 visa students (and their more than 300 dependents) will have little choice but to secure transfer to another school or risk being rendered without lawful status in the United States," the court filing stated, adding that the university can no longer sponsor these visa holders for its upcoming summer and fall terms, despite having admitted thousands.

F-1 visas are for academic students, M-1 for vocational students, and J-1 for exchange visitors.

Also read:[After a new lifeline, Vodafone Idea searches for a new CEO](#)

"Effective immediately, countless academic programs, research laboratories, clinics and courses supported by Harvard's international students have been thrown into disarray," the filing stated. "The government's actions come just days before graduation. Without its international students, Harvard is not Harvard."

The university sent an email to its foreign students on Friday morning India time, informing them of the US government's order. Among those from India who received an email from, at 2.30 am on Friday, was a Mumbai-based student heading to the university for a four-year undergraduate course.

"There is panic and we can do nothing, many have received this mail," said the student, who did not want to be named, mirroring the worry of thousands of Indian students studying or who have been admitted to Harvard.

Harvard's student and exchange visitor program (SEVP) certification collects, maintains, analyzes and provides information so that only legitimate foreign students or exchange visitors gain entry to the US. The DHS's order made allegations against the campus, which include creating an "unsafe" and "anti-American" campus. It has provided a 72-hour window to Harvard to comply with specific conditions to reinstate its ability to enroll foreign students.

Also read:[Mark My Worth: One budget, many hopefuls— who gets the hike?](#)

"The biggest effect of this is that it creates uncertainty for students," Dhruva Bhat, director of Lumiere Education told *Mint*. "The courts will rule on these issues soon, and there are midterm elections coming up in 2025, so these changes may not stay."

Bhat, a Harvard alumna along with batchmate Stephen Turban, founded Lumiere Education that consults students for an admission into the Ivy League colleges.

"For a student planning to make a multi-year investment decision worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, these actions make them think twice," Bhat said. "More and more of the students I'm talking to are asking if they should consider gap years, or apply to the UK or other countries as a backup."

A degree in these colleges can set students back by \$55,000-100,000 a year for a four-year undergraduate course.

According to data provided by Open Doors Report, a portal for international students, the number of Indian students studying in the US in academic year 2023-24 hit an all-time high of 331,602, an uptick of 23% from 2022-23, when it stood at 268,923.

Many Indian parents are concerned that political clashes will impact the future of their children. As a result, other destinations may see a rise in popularity.

"Parents have called on whether they can apply to other colleges outside the US like Canada, Australia and the UK," said Namrata Pandey, founder and chief mentor of La Mentora, an organization that specializes in helping students gain admission into universities in India and overseas. "Those applying for admissions this year will not opt for early decisions to these US colleges."

According to data provided by the Indian government in Parliament in March, 750,000 Indians were studying abroad in 2022. That number shot up to 892,000 in 2023 but dipped to 759,000 in 2024 in the wake of geopolitical crises, as well as with Canada and Australia tightening their admissions criteria.

However, some education consultants feel this storm may blow out soon. "International students are integral to the universities and add to the revenue and learnings of the college," said Namita Mehta, president and partner at education consulting firm The Red Pen, which sends 50 students a year to Ivy league colleges for undergraduate and post-graduate programs.

The background

US President Donald Trump's regime has been in a battle with universities, especially Harvard. The US government had cut \$2.7 million in federal grants to Harvard University in April, which the university has challenged in court. On May 20, the federal Joint Task Force to Combat Antisemitism said that Harvard researchers would lose another \$450 million in grants from several agencies.

Harvard is part of the prestigious Ivy League, which also has in its ranks Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University and Yale University.