

US says speeding up visas for researchers

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The front of the US State Department in Washington, DC. The United States is speeding up visa applications for researchers and graduate students, an official said Thursday, hoping to ease a long backlog that raised fears that scientists would head elsewhere.

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The State Department has added staff and made procedural changes and now expects to process researcher visas in around two weeks, said David Donahue, the deputy assistant secretary of state for consular affairs.

"We think that we're the best place to do this kind of work. We're cutting edge," Donahue told AFP. "We want people to feel comfortable about coming here."

The [United States](#) last year issued around 56,000 such visas for graduate students in high-tech fields, scientists at research laboratories and scholars attending academic conferences, Donahue said.

But the United States sometimes took months last year to issue the visas, of which Indians and Chinese are major recipients.

Donahue blamed the backlog on a staffing shortage and a spike in applications.

US universities -- where foreign students often account for a large number of spots in graduate programs -- had voiced concern, fearing that students would turn to other countries due to the hassle of obtaining US visas.

The efforts to clear the backlog come ahead of an initiative this month by US President [Barack Obama](#) to reform the immigration system. Obama is expected to look for ways for undocumented workers to legalize their status.

Amid the [recession](#), some US lawmakers have been lobbying to give fewer so-called H-1B visas, which go to full-time workers in high-tech fields.

Companies can seek up to 85,000 H-1B visas for their workers in the fiscal year starting in October. Asians usually get some three-quarters of the visas, with Indians alone taking one-quarter.

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