

Iranians, engines of US university research, wait in limbo

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In this April 6, 2016, file photo, Iranian students prepare their robots during the international robotics competition, RoboCup Iran Open 2016, in Tehran, Iran. Universities in the U.S. say President Donald Trump's revised travel ban would block hundreds of graduate students who play key roles in research. Twenty-five of America's largest universities told The Associated Press they've sent acceptance letters to more than 500 students from the six banned countries for next fall, mostly from Iran, who are known for their strength in engineering and sciences. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

Hundreds of Iranian students already accepted into U.S. graduate programs may not be able to come next fall because of the uncertainty surrounding President Donald Trump's proposed travel ban, potentially derailing research projects and leaving some science programs scrambling to find new students.

With admission season still in full swing, 25 of America's largest research universities have already sent more than 500 acceptance letters to students from the six affected countries, according to data provided by schools in response to Associated Press requests. The vast majority of those students are from Iran, where undergraduate programs are known for their strength in engineering and computer sciences.

The ban, which would suspend immigration from Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Syria and Yemen, has been blocked by federal judges. But if the court ruling is overturned or if Trump issues a new immigration ban, students would be locked out for next fall, legal experts say.

"For us to not have access to that talent pool is a major, major blow. It is unimaginable in schools of engineering across the country to lose that talent," said Kazem Kazerounian, dean of the School of Engineering at the University of Connecticut, which has accepted 15 Iranian students so far.

The new uncertainty has steered some students to other nations that compete with the U.S. for top students, including Canada, Australia and Japan, officials at some schools say.

Students from Iran have helped fill graduate programs at American colleges for years, especially in engineering schools. Out of 12,000 Iranian students who attended U.S. universities last year, 77 percent were graduate students and more than half studied engineering, according to data from the State Department and the Institute of International

Education, a nonprofit in Washington.

At the University of Central Florida, a third of the 115 students who have been accepted to graduate programs in civil and [electrical engineering](#) for next fall are from Iran.

Iranian student Amir Soleimani, 26, has been accepted to two universities in the U.S., where he wants to pursue a doctorate in electrical engineering and continue his research on artificial intelligence. If he is kept out, he says, he'll likely have to begin his two years of mandatory service in Iran's military.

"My future is very dependent on this ban," said Soleimani, who lives in the city of Mashhad and has a master's in electrical engineering from the University of Tehran. "We have spent lots of our time and our energy to apply to top universities, and now that we have been admitted to these universities, it is very disastrous to see we may be banned."

Once implemented, the ban would last 90 days, but even afterward it would likely be too late for students to complete the months-long process to obtain visas.

Many U.S. universities rely on international students to work as research and teaching assistants, particularly in engineering. Americans who study engineering as undergraduates often opt for the job market instead of graduate [school](#), experts say, leaving them to rely heavily on [international students](#). Some schools also rely on tuition money from foreign students, who are typically charged full costs.

The University of Massachusetts at Amherst has offered acceptance to 42 Iranian students in graduate programs, and their absence would interfere with the progress of research, said John McCarthy, dean of the [university's graduate school](#).

"It's not something where we can just suddenly go out in the street and grab somebody who's qualified to be a PhD [student](#) in electrical engineering," McCarthy said.

At the University of Central Florida, 30 percent of the students working at the school's Center for Research in Computer Vision are from Iran, and all of them play key roles in research, said Mubarak Shah, director of the center. Some, for example, are working on a \$1.3 million project funded by a federal grant to develop computer technology that can quickly analyze thousands of hours of surveillance footage in an effort to help speed up criminal investigations.

"We are concerned that this may hurt us long-term in research," Shah said.

So far, Central Florida has offered admission to 87 graduate students from Iran for next fall. The university may be able to find replacements this year, but the quality of programs would likely suffer, said Dale Whittaker, the university's provost.

"These numbers are pretty high," he said. "I doubt that we would be able to fill 20 spots with high-quality students in one cohort."

Even if the White House does not restore the ban, many schools fear students overseas will think twice about coming to the U.S. At Ohio State University, total graduate applications from abroad are down 8 percent this year, including countries not affected by the ban. Numbers at Indiana University are down 11 percent.

"It's a big concern within the field, and not just at Indiana," said John Wilkerson, Indiana University's director of international affairs.

Indiana and some other universities have promised to refund application

fees for students if they're banned, and some schools are offering to defer admission for a year. Many Iranian students have contacted the nonprofit American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee asking for advice, but for now, experts say, there's little to give.

"It's all up in limbo, even with the court orders," said Abed Ayoub, the group's legal and policy director. "If an opportunity does present itself in another country, they just may have to take that."

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