

## Immigration and visa policy perceptions among US scientists

SciOPS Project Team

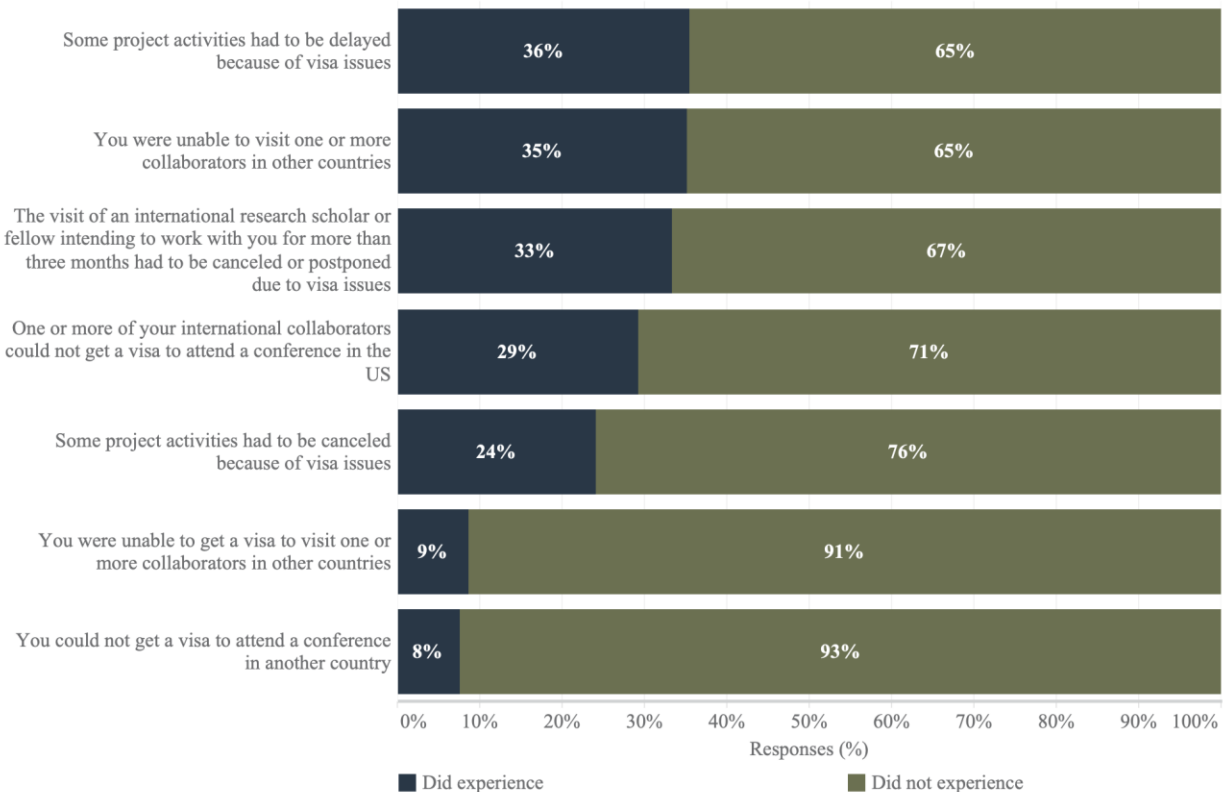
There have been important changes and delays to the US visa and immigration process in 2020 – as the result of executive policy change and responses to COVID-19. In the summer of 2020, the Trump Administration attempted to bar international students from living in the US while taking fall classes online. Meanwhile, universities struggled to admit and enroll new international students who were unable to travel from their home countries to the US or access US embassies abroad. Enrollment of international students in 2020 fell by 43% (Fischer 2020). Additionally, in June 2020 the Trump Administration sought to limit the allocation of H-1B visas, which are typically awarded to high skill workers. In recent years, the majority of the annual 85,000 H-1B visas issued have gone to technology workers – many of whom are international graduates of US universities (O’Toole 2020). The shifting political climate and travel restrictions related to COVID-19 have had immediate effects on university enrollments of international students, but how is it affecting scientist work and collaborations?

In November 2020, we asked a nationally representative sample of US-based academic scientists about their experiences with and opinions about current visa and immigration issues affecting their work life, student management, and research outcomes.

### Scientist Experiences during COVID-19 Travel Restrictions

We asked scientists if they experienced assorted barriers to research and travel over the last 12 months. Figure 1 shows that around one-third of respondents (36%) indicated some of their research project activities had to be delayed because of visa issues, while 24% reported cancelling some project activities.

In the past 12 months, have you experienced any of the following? (N=368)



**Figure 1: Experiences with travel and research delays** (Exact question wording: “In the past 12 months, did you experience any of the following?”).

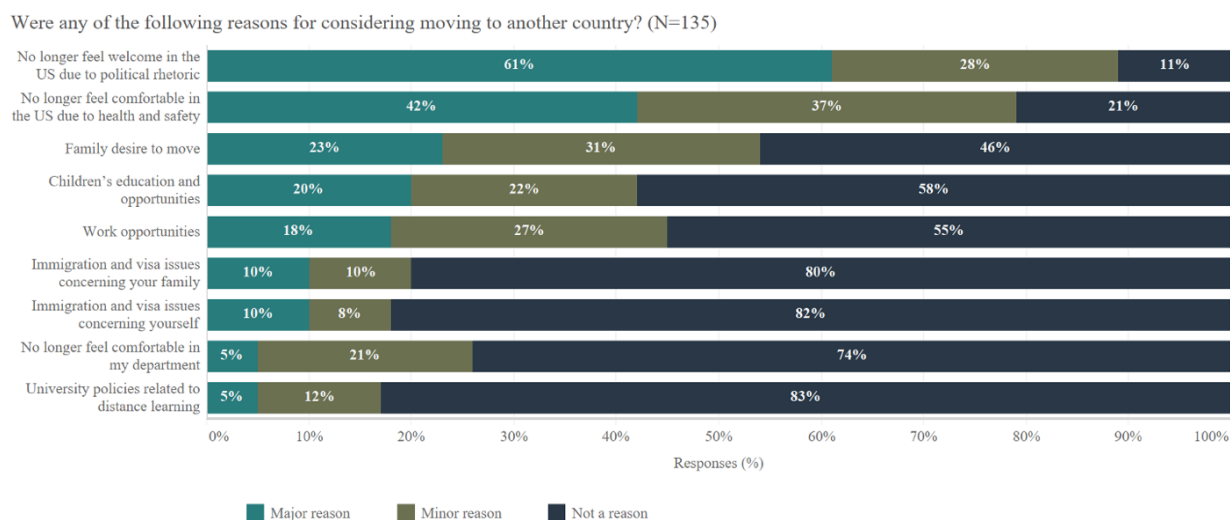
One-third (35%) reported being unable to visit collaborators in other countries and 33% reported being unable to host an international research scholar due to visa issues. Of 368 respondents, 220 respondents (60%) reported experiencing at least one barriers and 161 (44%) reported facing more than one. Learn more about this survey [here](#).

### Scientist Perceptions of Changing US Visa and Immigration Policies

We then asked scientists their opinions of the potential positive and negative effects of current US visa and immigration policies. More than 80% indicated that current US visa and immigration policies have had a negative or very negative effect on the ability to attract top talent to study at US-based institutions of higher education (89%); the global competitiveness of US science (87%); the strength of US high technology industry (83%); the development of scientific workforce (87%); the openness of global science (87%); and the diversity of US institutions of higher education (87%).

Scientists reported that new visa and immigration policies have increased international scholars’ preferences to work outside the US. Almost half (46%) of non-US citizen respondents and one-third (35%) of US citizen respondents to this survey indicate that in the last 12 months they have seriously considered moving to another country outside of the US.

Figure 2 illustrates major and minor reasons for considering leaving the US. Among those considering leaving the US (both US and non-US citizens), 61% report a major reason is they “no longer feel welcome in the US due to political rhetoric” and 42% report a major reason is they “no longer feel comfortable in the US due to health and safety”.



**Figure 2. Major and Minor reasons for considering leaving the US.** (Exact question wording: “Were any of the following reasons for considering moving to another country?”)

### Advancing academic science with visa and immigration uncertainty

Current US immigration and visa policies and delays associated with COVID-19 have disrupted the work of many US-based academic scientists. In addition to restricting travel, disrupting collaborations, and delaying student entry to the US, they have led many scientists, particularly those who are not US citizens, to consider relocating to countries outside of the US. Given the economic and technological advantages of robust scientific research communities, the policies of the Trump Administration appear to have had

negative unintended consequences on the health of scientific research in higher education. Learn more about this survey [here](#).

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### **About SciOPS**

The Scientist Opinion Panel Survey (SciOPS) is a new type of science communication platform, developed at Arizona State University that provides aggregated, unfiltered, diverse expert opinions on timely, important science and technology issues to promote deeper understanding and connections to science in society. To learn more about the SciOPS team and data visit <https://www.sci-ops.org/>.

### **References**

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O'Toole, Molly. 2020. Trump announces new visa restrictions on immigrant workers but exempts agriculture, food service, health. JUNE 22, 2020, 1:11 PM. LA Times. Accessed Jan 1, 2020 at <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-06-22/trump-visa-restrictions-immigrant-workers>