

feature

US visas

The student visa application process has become problematic for many education providers in the USA. High schools report difficulties in some markets.

US higher education providers have been reporting a slowdown in international enrolments in recent years and many have attributed this to the introduction of tightened visa regulations following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (see *Education Travel Magazine*, March 2004, page 51). The requirement that all visa applicants have an interview, combined with increased security checks for applicants from some countries, and the introduction of the Sevis tracking system have all taken their toll on higher education enrolments, but how have these changes affected students wanting to attend secondary schools in the USA?

Marsha Bernstein from Worcester Academy in Worcester, MA, has noticed increasing difficulties among their international students in obtaining an F-1 student visa – required to study in any private high school programme. “It is getting harder and harder to obtain these visas, although it is easier [for] some countries,” she says.

In contrast, Bob Suphan from Oakwood Friends School in Poughkeepsie, NY, says that their international students have not experienced any difficulties in getting a visa since Sevis went into operation “although the process is somewhat longer”. But he adds, “I have heard that a number of other private secondary schools have had their Japanese students rejected for visas lately.”

International students wanting to study in a private high school need the F-1 visa, while those undertaking a student exchange programme can apply for a J-1 visa, which is valid for a maximum of one year. Joan Boru, President of the Aspect Foundation, says that they offer both high school entry as well as high school exchange programmes and have not experienced many visa denials. However, she adds, “The exception to this is mainland China where they will not issue J-1 visas to the USA.”

Boru adds that, due to the length of time required for an application to be processed and a student to

apply for their visa, visa refusals for their high school programme can have a detrimental effect on international student enrolments. “We can only take a certain number of students on the high school programme for one academic year,” she explains. “When a visa is denied then that lowers our numbers as we cannot open up the application process to another student [at this stage].”

Many high schools report that rates of visa refusal are closely related to particular nationalities, which largely dictates the nationality mix in their international student body. “Most of our international students come from Asia – mostly Korea and Taiwan,” confirms Bernstein. “This is probably due to a combination of their economy, their desire to study in the USA and – so far – the ease by which they can get a student visa.”

Alan Whittemore from Fryeburg Academy in Fryeburg, ME, confirms that their main student recruitment region continues to be Asia, “specifically South Korea and more recently Thailand and Vietnam”. Other important markets for the school are Germany, Bermuda, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Hong Kong, although Chinese students are noticeably lacking here and at many other US high schools. “In 1999 we were fortunate enough to host 12 mainland Chinese students, [and from there it] has always been notoriously difficult to obtain visas,” says Whittemore. “Following the 2000 US presidential election, we have yet to see another student from [China].”

While visa problems are undoubtedly an issue for all education providers, particularly for some nationalities, agents are not seeing a marked reduction in interest in US high school programmes. Erick Garcia from Study ‘n’ Travel in Brazil points out that the screening of students for the purpose of getting a visa has not changed very much in Brazil and that other destinations, such as Australia, have equally rigid visa regulations. “The USA is the most popular destination for high school [students],” he confirms.