

Not Yet Nirvana: International Higher Education Implications of the US Election

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Much of the higher education world, in the United States and beyond, is overjoyed that Donald Trump will soon be leaving power. His departure will bring immediate and positive changes that will affect the US and the international higher education landscape. But Trumpism is far from gone. The kind of populism and nationalism that Trump exemplifies remains part of American reality—and of the realities of many other countries. The divide between anti-international and anti-immigration advocates and climate change deniers on the one hand, and those in favor of international collaboration to help address key challenges locally and globally, is fiercer than ever, in the United States and in the rest of the world.

Quick Changes

Of course, during the Trump presidency, the US higher education community continued to engage internationally, but the policies and the rhetoric of the Trump administration had a severe impact.

Policies that are likely to be quickly reversed are visa restrictions, elements of the “Muslim ban” that may still be in practice, time restrictions on student visas, tight regulations on Optional Practical Training (OPT) and H-1B visa, and others. Regulations concerning postdoctoral appointments will revert to traditional practice. Procedures for foreign graduates to obtain a green card will become easier. And the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program, which does not directly affect international higher education but provides protection to 643,000 immigrants, will be reinstated. Existing exchange programs such as Fulbright, which were under threat and suffered budget cuts, will be safe. Hopefully, the partisan politicization of international initiatives will end.

In general, US governmental policies relating to international higher education will most probably revert to pre-Trump norms. But with the continuing COVID-19 crisis and ensuing fiscal and economic disruptions, new initiatives are very unlikely. Given the strong determination of incoming vice-president Kamala Harris, important issues of racism and inequality in higher education, in particular in study abroad and international student policies, will receive renewed attention. But given their systemic presence in the sector, they will not be easy to overcome.

Broader Trends

Overall, the transition to a Biden presidency in the United States will imply a substantive shift in tone toward increased international collaboration in research and in education and the revision of a number of draconian measures that have affected international students, faculty, and partnerships. But one can wonder if it will be possible to correct the enormous damage inflicted to the country's international reputation in the past four years. At best, one can say that international higher education will be in a less deplorable state under Biden than under Trump, and this, in itself, is something to rejoice about. ▲

Abstract

The departure of Donald Trump as president of the United States will bring some immediate and positive changes to the US and international higher education landscape. But the kind of populism and nationalism that Trump exemplified remains part of the US reality—and of the realities of many other countries. At best, one can say that international higher education will be in a less deplorable state under Biden, and that is something to be pleased about.

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