

Opinion – International Students Are a High-Return Investment for the United States

Written by Mohammad Javad Mousavizadeh

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MOHAMMAD JAVAD MOUSAVIZADEH, JUN 29 2025

The United States hosts over one million international students annually, more than any other nation, drawn by the prestige of institutions like Harvard, MIT, and Stanford, which dominate global university rankings. These students, who contributed nearly \$44 billion to the U.S. economy in the 2023–2024 academic year, are not just economic assets but pivotal players in America’s soft power strategy. Since the 1950s, programs like Fulbright have fostered educational exchanges to build global goodwill, a tactic that proved effective during the Cold War when over 50,000 Soviet citizens experienced American culture firsthand.

Andrei Kozyrev, a Soviet diplomat, participated in the Fulbright program during the 1980s, spending time in the United States as a scholar. Kozyrev rose to prominence as the foreign minister of the Russian Federation from 1990 to 1996, serving during the critical transition period following the Soviet Union’s dissolution. In this role, he was responsible for redefining Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. Kozyrev advocated for closer ties with the West. Kozyrev’s time in the U.S. through the Fulbright program significantly influenced his pro-Western outlook. His exposure to American democratic institutions and international diplomacy shaped his belief that Russia should align itself with Western nations rather than perpetuate Cold War hostilities.

In recent years, more than 200 world leaders have been educated in U.S. universities—including 42 current heads of state, 13 with business degrees. Rishi Sunak, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, earned an MBA from Stanford University. Sunak’s time at Stanford equipped him with skills that he later applied in his political and economic leadership roles. Another example, Lee Hsien Loong, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, holds a master’s degree in public administration from Harvard University. While not a business degree, his education at Harvard highlights the significant influence of U.S. universities on global leaders, especially in areas like public policy and governance. His academic background has contributed to his long tenure as a key figure in Singapore’s government. Other examples abound. In general, international students often return home as informal ambassadors, fostering cultural affinity and understanding of U.S. values that shape diplomatic ties.

In general, universities cultivate future leaders who carry American values back to their home countries, enhancing U.S. influence in nations with differing ideologies. Leaders educated in the U.S. are more likely to understand and engage with American diplomatic priorities, strengthening ties around the world. Yet, the Trump administration’s approach to international students has raised concerns about weakening this strategic advantage. Policies such as the 2020 rule limiting visas for students without in-person classes, and a travel ban affecting 12 countries, reflect a more restrictive stance. The administration cited national security concerns, pointing to instances of espionage—particularly involving Chinese students amid rising U.S.-China tensions. While the Trump administration highlighted risks like intellectual property theft, these concerns often appear overstated, as cases of student-led espionage were rare and largely manageable under existing safeguards. Thus, international students remain a low-risk, high-reward investment in America’s global influence.

Concerns persist about foreign influence, with reports highlighting tens of billions of dollars in donations from countries like Qatar and China to U.S. universities between 2021 and 2024. These contributions have raised questions about academic integrity and potential links to rising anti-Semitic incidents on campuses. These concerns

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are not unfounded: Qatar's support for Hamas and the involvement of some international students in anti-Israel protests have fueled public skepticism.

Despite these risks, the benefits of hosting international students far outweigh the drawbacks. Economically, they create 378,175 jobs across the nation. Their impact ranges from small businesses to billion-dollar startups founded by individuals like Elon Musk and Noubar Afeyan, whose company Moderna helped pioneer a COVID-19 vaccine. Academically, they enhance diversity and drive innovation, with international students having founded 25 percent of U.S. billion-dollar startups.

The Trump administration's security-driven policies, while addressing legitimate threats, risk undermining this soft power engine. Strict visa policies and deportations, such as those targeting students involved in campus protests, may deter talent from choosing the U.S., pushing them toward competitors like the UK, Canada, or even China. The U.S. is losing its uncontested status as the top destination for international students, with visa hurdles sending a message of unwelcomeness. Other nations are capitalizing on this shift, offering streamlined pathways for global talent. If the U.S. continues to tighten restrictions, it could cede not only economic benefits but also the long-term diplomatic leverage gained from educating the world's future leaders.

The Trump administration's focus on skilled trade programs over a "college-for-all" model reflects a broader skepticism of higher education's value — Republicans won 14 of the 15 least-educated states in 2024, while Democrats dominated the most-educated.

The notion that international students fuel issues like antisemitism requires nuance. While some protests have involved international students, incidents like the killing of two Israeli staffers in Washington, D.C., by an American citizen highlight that such issues are not solely imported. Universities must balance free expression with preventing divisive rhetoric, ensuring they remain hubs of cultural exchange rather than political battlegrounds. This exchange—both cultural and political—allows students to engage with American ideals while sharing their perspectives, fostering mutual understanding. Many international students return home, carrying these experiences to influence their societies, from political insights to lifestyles, amplifying U.S. influence globally.

Welcoming international students remains one of the most low-cost, high-yield investments in the U.S.'s global standing. America's campuses are quietly shaping the next generation of global leadership, and diminishing this role not only weakens U.S. diplomacy—it undercuts the very values it seeks to defend. The U.S. must recognize that its universities are not just classrooms but vital arenas for building bridges between countries.

About the author:

Mohammad Javad Mousavizadeh is a Washington, DC-based journalist and analyst specializing in international affairs and foreign policy. He has written on Middle East issues for *The National Interest*, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, *Daily Sabah*, and *Middle East Monitor*, as well as Iranian outlets such as *Etemad*, *Mardom Salari*, *Shahrvand*, and *Hamdeli*. His insights have been featured by research centers and news agencies, including the Atlantic Council, Russia Today, and Al Jazeera.