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# Will Harvard lose foreign students?



The US government's decision to seriously review Harvard University's status under the international student programme (SEVP visa programme) and the announcement of the possibility of revoking tax-exempt status for this institution represent the most serious institutional attack of a government on academic autonomy in modern American history.

The focus is on a letter from the Secretary of Homeland Security (DHS), Kristi Noem, **threatening** to revoke Harvard's right to enrol foreign students if it does not provide full information on the alleged "illegal and violent activities" of student visa holders by 30 April 2025.

In addition, the US government has already **suspended** two federal grants, totalling \$2.7 million. The exact amount of the Harvard grants cancelled by DHS is \$2,735,205. These are two specific grants:

\$800,303 for the Implementation Science for Targeted Violence Prevention

\$1,934,902 for the Blue Campaign Program Evaluation and Violence Advisement.

The Secretary of Homeland Security, Kristy Noem, officially cancelled these funds on 16 April 2025 through an executive order. This is part of the Trump administration's broader campaign against Harvard for allegedly "promoting an anti-American, pro-Hamas ideology".

The next step could be the elimination of tax-exempt status, which is unprecedented.

If these measures go into effect, the consequences for Harvard and the broader higher education system in the US will be profound and far-reaching.

## The continuation of a political campaign

Although the US administration's move is

nominally motivated by the fight against anti-Semitism and "illegal activity" on campuses, it is in fact the continuation of a political campaign aimed at disciplining the most prestigious universities for their stance on the war in Gaza and their refusal to comply with the White House's demands.

The demands sent to Harvard – ending diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programmes, banning masks at protests, and enforcing strict hiring and admissions rules – clearly show that this is a broader cultural and ideological battle. The university's refusal to comply with these demands has led to direct financial and legal reprisals.

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Autonomy, pluralism of thought and academic freedom are under direct attack, with the potential to change the face of American academia for years to come.

## A chain reaction

Harvard is not an isolated case. Similar treatment is announced for other leading universities such as Columbia, Princeton, Brown and Northwestern University. In all these cases, the pattern is the same: pro-Palestinian protests, resistance to White House directives, and then institutional pressure.

Harvard, however, is not just one of the universities; it is a symbol. It serves as a symbol of American intellectual supremacy, liberal values, and global academic appeal.

The attack on Harvard is an attack on what

makes the United States recognisable and competitive in the global education market.

If this institution buckles under the pressure, it won't just be about one campus — it will set off a chain reaction where universities across the US will have to choose between survival and obedience.

**Losing the right to enrol foreign students would not just be a financial blow; it would be a strategic defeat for American soft power**

Harvard currently has 6,793 foreign students, 27.2% of the total student body. Like many other elite American universities, Harvard has built its prestige and global influence on openness to the world. Foreign students are not just a source of income — they are ambassadors of knowledge, cultural bridges, and generators of international research networks.

Losing the right to enrol foreign students would not just be a financial blow; it would be a strategic defeat for American soft power.

Harvard could lose hundreds of millions of dollars a year in tuition, grants, and research projects made possible by international students and partners. In the long term, such a blow would mean the significant loss of US influence as a global leader in higher education.

## Institutional suppression of dissent

Should the Trump administration successfully undermine Harvard's autonomy, it will pave the way for the institutional suppression of dissent.

Political power would no longer be limited to regulating financial flows; it could also determine the content of teaching programmes, recruitment criteria, and even

the academic agenda.



*Should the Trump administration successfully undermine Harvard's autonomy, it will pave the way for the institutional suppression of dissent – Kristi Noem*

This development poses serious risks for democracy. If universities start censoring their own professors, students, and researchers to avoid political reprisals, the space for critical thinking—the essence of a free society— will disappear.

Countries such as Canada, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia are already **gaining** ground as destinations for students who previously favoured the US. Should Harvard face an admission ban for foreigners, this process will swiftly progress.

According to UNESCO and the OECD, there are already signs of a trend reversal in global student mobility: the number of enrolments at American universities is **stagnating**, while Europe and Asia are seeing an increase.

The US has been the first choice for decades, but if a pattern of political interference in university processes becomes established, students will choose a safer environment for their academic and professional development.

## Possible scenarios

What happens next: possible scenarios for the development of the crisis

Judicial review and temporary blocking of decisions – Harvard is likely to be supported



by a number of legal organisations and file a lawsuit for violation of constitutional rights. Federal courts could issue injunctions that would block the implementation of the announced sanctions.

Academic coalition in defence of autonomy - A broad academic coalition of prestigious universities is expected to form that will refuse to bow to the government's demands. This could be a turning point in redefining the relationship between academic institutions and the state.

Further political polarisation of the education sector - Given Donald Trump's governing style, a further tightening of the stance towards elite educational institutions, which are perceived as ideological opponents of his administration, is to be expected.

Global redistribution of academic prestige - If the US loses its leadership position in the global education system, others will fill the vacuum. China is already positioning itself as an alternative centre of academic power with its accelerated development of university centres and major investment in research.

Harvard is now the limit. This limit is not only symbolic, but also crucial. Softening that limit will make it challenging to regain trust in the independence of American education. However, if it defends its status, it will send a strong message that even the strongest political power cannot dictate knowledge.

As in many historical moments, universities now find themselves at a crossroads between "collaboration" and resistance. The decision they make, with Harvard leading the way, will shape the image of not only American but also global education for decades to come.

At this point, the question is not just whether Harvard will lose foreign students. Rather, the question is whether America will lose what has made its university system the most desirable place in the world to acquire knowledge.