

## International Scholars Office

The International Scholars Office (ISO) facilitates visas for international researchers and professors, who come to MIT for a variety of purposes. The ISO advises on immigration matters, issues visa documents, and provides guidance, workshops, and literature on a wide range of issues relevant to the international scholar population. Weekly orientation sessions are held for incoming scholars and family members. The ISO also engages in advocacy efforts to protect international educational exchange, prevent burdensome regulations, and clarify and improve related regulations and procedures.

### MIT's International Scholar Population FY2006

The ISO served 1,618 international scholars affiliated with MIT as well as their accompanying family members during FY2006. This reflects a 4 percent decrease since last year (1,687). According to the most recent Institute of International Education *Open Doors* report (2005), MIT ranked ninth nationally with regard to the number of international scholars at US institutions.

International scholars came to MIT from 78 countries, with the highest numbers coming from the People's Republic of China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Germany, Canada, India, Italy, the United Kingdom, Israel, and France. The ISO worked closely with administrators in 69 departments, laboratories, and centers, preparing the appropriate visa documents and petitions for incoming and continuing scholars and their families. The areas hosting the largest number of scholars were the following, in descending order: the MIT Sloan School of Management, the Department of Chemistry, the Department of Materials Science and Engineering, the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, the Department of Mechanical Engineering, the Research Laboratory of Electronics, the Departments of Biology and of Chemical Engineering (tied), the Biological Engineering Division, and the Picower Institute for Learning and Memory. Of these international scholars, 23 percent were female and 77 percent were male.

The majority of MIT's international scholars were sponsored on MIT's J-1 exchange visitor program. There were 818 scholars under MIT's J-1 program sponsorship during the reporting period, up 4.3 percent since last year (784). An additional 79 scholars were here through other J sponsors. There were 364 scholars on campus in H-1B status, sponsored by MIT. This reflects a 6.2 percent decrease since last year (388). This may be due to the new ability of J-1 program sponsors to extend J-1 documents for up to five years versus the previous three-year limit. There were six international scholars on campus this year whose O-1 visas were sponsored by MIT. The rest of the scholar population had other sponsors or nonimmigrant categories. (Note that some scholars held more than one visa status over the course of the reporting period.) According to Human Resources Information Systems data, 64.4 percent of MIT's postdoctoral associates and fellows are non-US citizens, as are 57.4 percent of "visiting" appointees.

The ISO submitted 22 permanent residence petitions to US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) on behalf of MIT faculty members and upper-level researchers.

An unprecedented number (24) of new international faculty accepted positions beginning in AY2007. The ISO was informed of another four international faculty who have already accepted positions for AY2008. Visa processing begins as soon as the ISO is informed of incoming faculty.

### **MIT Initiatives and the International Scholars Office**

The Singapore-MIT Alliance, which has successfully welcomed students in recent years, has begun inviting participants at the postdoctoral level. In addition, the Leaders for Manufacturing Program brought the first 15 scholars for the China Leaders for Manufacturing Program from Shanghai Jiao Tong University. The ISO provided visa sponsorship processing for participants in these programs.

A large laboratory moved from Harvard to MIT's Picower Institute for Learning and Memory with many of its personnel, including 15 international postdoctoral associates and fellows. The ISO facilitated a smooth transition of visa sponsorship from Harvard to MIT, avoiding any gaps in work authorization for the staff involved.

The staff of the ISO participated in a tour of the Bates Linear Accelerator Center in Middleton, MA. An international researcher gave a full presentation on the activities and projects run by Bates, and helped ISO staff to understand the work of researchers whom they help. Several ISO staff also attended a tour of the MIT Nuclear Reactor Laboratory. These visits are an exciting part of the ISO's initiative to help its staff feel more involved and integral to the community of its clients and to the Institute.

### **Primary Activities and Government Agency Impact**

The ISO continues to ensure institutional compliance with federal mandates related to visa sponsorship of foreign scholars.

Although securing a visa at a US consulate abroad can be a challenging and frustrating activity for MIT international scholars, the majority are granted visas. There are a small number each year, however, who face unexpected and protracted wait times while security clearances are conducted prior to visa issuance. And, in some cases, it is unclear why the US Department of State deems a security clearance necessary, especially for visa extensions.

The cap on the number of H-1B petitions that may be processed by USCIS for the coming year was reached immediately upon availability. International scholars employed at academic institutions are exempt from the cap; however, international scholars completing their MIT work found themselves unable to secure H-1B visas in the private sector. For international postdoctoral scholars and other internationals trained by MIT, this was a hindrance to their US research experience and careers.

In January 2006, the US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics released new prevailing wage data. Employers must ask the State Workforce Agency (SWA) for a prevailing wage determination before filing H-1B temporary worker petitions or labor certifications. The data released were inconsistent with academic compensation and fellowships. In many cases, prevailing wages far exceeded typical National Science

Foundation and National Institutes of Health funding for postdoctoral associates and fellows. The director of ISO wrote a letter to the US Secretary of Labor in response to the inflated wage data and ISO staff worked with the local SWA to find solutions on particular cases. The problem persists, despite advocacy on the national level to make the origin of the Occupational Employment Statistics survey data public and the process of surveying more transparent.

USCIS processing fees were raised once again during this year, despite slower processing times. The ISO remains disappointed that the USCIS initiative to reduce backlogs and processing times shows little progress.

In addition to existing delays and backlogs in USCIS processing of petitions, in November 2005 immigrant visa numbers retrogressed for nationals of India and China. This further delayed the ability of scholars from these countries to adjust to permanent resident status. For MIT faculty and researchers who had already been waiting one to three years to complete the process, this was very bad news. Some progress was made in reducing the backlog during the year; however, it is anticipated that numbers could retrogress again in the near future. The ISO communicated this information and provided a question and answer brief to the international scholar community to clarify this issue and its effects. In accordance with legislation passed to bridge the gap during green card delays, the ISO found it necessary again this year to extend the H visas of numerous international faculty and researchers (with fees) beyond the usual six-year H-1B limit while their permanent residence applications remained pending.

The director monitored and analyzed proposed immigration reform legislation. Many bills were introduced in the US Congress containing provisions related to international students, scholars and their families, H-1B visas, and green cards. ISO reviewed each to determine the provisions beneficial for academic employers, international students, and scholars. The director met with William Bonvillian, MIT's director of federal relations, to discuss the proposed bills.

### **Other Professional Activities**

The director and assistant director participated in Association of International Educations (NAFSA) subcommittees and task forces on scholar issues, regulations, government agency processing, and legislative action. On these ongoing subcommittees, they provide information and ideas for use in advocacy, practice, and agency relations. The ISO also worked with William Bonvillian and Alice Gast, the vice president for research and associate provost, who are both instrumental in communicating MIT's concerns.

### **Communication with the Institute**

In addition to advising, preparing immigration documents, providing advocacy, running a weekly orientation program, and supplying extensive written and web-based information, the ISO sponsored programming events open to the campus community. Advisories about what to do in response to world events affecting visa processing and travel were sent immediately to the MIT community via email, the ISO website, and as hard copy. Several times this year, ISO staff also conducted workshops for

new administrators in departments, laboratories, and centers (DLCs) who have visa processing as a part of their responsibilities. Primary DLC liaisons are also informed of changes in procedures, immigration regulations, and ISO practice through a custom listserv.

## **Personnel**

Penny Rosser continued as director of the ISO. Vivian Ruiz, an experienced scholar advisor and immigration attorney, was hired in January 2006 as assistant director, replacing Sharon Ralston, who left the ISO in October 2005. Amanda Doran and Fumiko Futai continued as advisors to international scholars, and Mireille McLaughlin continued as administrative assistant.

### **Penny Rosser Director**

*More information about the International Scholars Office can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/scholars/>.*