

International Scholars Office

The [International Scholars Office \(ISchO\)](#) facilitates visas for international researchers and faculty who come to MIT for teaching, research, meetings, and programs. ISchO advises on immigration matters, issues visa documents, files petitions with government agencies, and provides guidance, workshops, and print and web-based information on a wide range of issues relevant to the international scholar population. Weekly orientation sessions are held for incoming scholars and family members. Orientation specifically for new international tenure-track faculty members is offered biannually. Workshops are given for department, laboratory, and center personnel administrators about working with the ISchO, MIT visa sponsorship policies, and visa processing. Additional programming for scholars and events open to the campus community are held throughout the year. Additionally, ISchO engages in advocacy efforts to protect international educational exchange, respond to burdensome government policies, and clarify and improve immigration-related regulations and procedures.

The Challenges of 2020–2021

Pandemic conditions around the world and US travel bans affected hundreds of current and prospective MIT international researchers and faculty. ISchO informed international scholars, departments, labs and centers, and the general MIT community about ever-changing travel restrictions and US policies, and posted ongoing web updates. Unfortunately, even the best advice and planning did not always yield the visa or travel results international scholars and the MIT departments, labs and centers hoped for from the US consulates or US Customs and Border Protection. As a result, constant pivoting to provide alternative strategies was needed.

Both the number of international scholars present at the Institute and the number of new scholars who were able to arrive decreased dramatically during the academic year 2021. However, the work of the International Scholars Office did not wane. Many new and expected scholars whose visa documents had been processed by ISchO ultimately did not arrive and were not appointed. Therefore, the statistics below do not reflect the extensive effort devoted to advising them and their departments in hope of visa and travel success, nor do they reflect the time spent providing ongoing, individualized advice to current international scholars who hoped to travel or bring family members to the United States.

Program dates for hundreds of J-1 exchange visitors were amended during the year. They were updated repeatedly for visitors who could not leave the United States as planned, due to lack of or cancellation of flights, home country lockdowns, and fear of traveling to pandemic hot spots, as well as for new, and expected exchange visitors whose arrival plans were upended by the pandemic. US government agency closures, staff reductions, and processing delays affected many nonimmigrant students and scholars and changed the visa strategies ISchO would normally follow. The post-degree practical training work authorization and STEM extensions of tens of thousands of international students in the United States were delayed or never issued.

ISchO quickly processed work visas for international postdocs in that situation and in time for them to start or continue working at MIT. Some international scholars

had planned to move on to other positions for other employers; when the pandemic affected those opportunities, MIT departments found ways to keep these scholars, and ISchO processed expedited extensions or changes of visa status. The work and travel permission of many applicants for US permanent residence—including that of MIT faculty and researchers—were delayed. In those cases, ISchO processed work visas to prevent gaps in employment.

ISchO continued to process standard extensions for all visa types. International faculty hires continued as usual, and ISchO processed visa petitions to facilitate their employment for the beginning of the academic year.

International Scholars

During the fiscal year, July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021, ISchO served 1,866 international scholars affiliated with MIT and their accompanying family members. In this regard, international is defined as non-US citizen and/or non-US permanent resident. According to the most recent Institute of International Education Open Doors report (2019–2020), MIT ranked 10th nationally with regard to the numbers of international scholars at US institutions.

Foreign national scholars came to MIT from 83 countries, with the highest numbers coming from the People’s Republic of China, India, the Republic of Korea, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, France, Spain and Israel. This closely resembles the top ten countries of origin of the total international scholar population in the US over the same period. Scholars from these top ten countries constituted 67% of MIT’s international scholar population.

ISchO worked closely with administrators in the 67 departments, laboratories, centers, and programs that hosted international scholars. The areas hosting the largest number of scholars were, in descending order: Mechanical Engineering, Chemistry, Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research, Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Department of Chemical Engineering, Research Laboratory of Electronics, McGovern Institute, Department of Biological Engineering, Sloan School of Management, and Picower Institute for Learning and Memory.

The majority of MIT’s international scholars were sponsored on MIT’s J-1 exchange visitor program. There were 881 scholars on MIT’s J-1 program in 2020–2021. An additional 43 scholars were here through other J sponsors (Fulbright, Cultural Vistas, and academic institutions). There were 284 scholars in H-1B status sponsored by MIT. Twenty-four scholars were in TN status and 12 were on O-1 visas sponsored by MIT. The rest of the scholar population had other sponsors or were in other nonimmigrant categories. ISchO also submitted permanent residence petitions to US Citizenship and Immigration Services on behalf of tenure-track faculty members and upper-level researchers.

Seventy-five percent of international scholars identified as men and 25% identified as women. International postdoctoral fellows and postdoctoral associates accounted for over 60% of MIT’s total postdoc population.

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