

Risk Alert

Travel to USA - Student Visa Applications



Overview

The US Department of State recently announced that no new student visa interview appointments are to be made available until further notice.

What has changed?

Media reports indicate that the State Department cable reads: "Effective immediately, in preparation for an expansion of required social media screening and vetting, consular sections should not add any additional student or exchange visitor (F, M, and J) visa appointment capacity until further guidance is issued [in a separate telegram], which we anticipate in the coming days." Our understanding is that existing visa appointments will be honoured but no new appointments are being made available. It is unclear what the timeframe may be for resumption of new visa appointments or whether consular sections will be given additional personnel to handle any backlog or deal with any additional work required by the planned social media screening.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio subsequently also instructed the immediate start of "additional vetting of any non-immigrant visa applicant seeking to travel to Harvard University for any purpose." This instruction is not limited to students and would potentially apply to any overseas visitor to Harvard University. It also advises that consular officers should consider whether private social media accounts might indicate that the applicant is hiding something.

How UMAL are approaching this

UMAL's usual stance is that it is a traveller's responsibility to ensure they have the correct documentation to allow them to travel and if they do not secure a visa then cover does not respond. Our view here however is, if they cannot secure a visa because the US has said no new appointments will be made available (and there is no reason why a visa would not ordinarily have been granted) then that is a cause outside of their control and cover should respond. The same should also apply if a booked appointment is cancelled by the embassy because of the new directive, but we would not be able to cover visa appointment costs for appointments which do not take place. This assumes of course that any booking was made prior to the announcement of this policy by the US Department of State.