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For all those who missed it, here's some news. Things just got better for students pursuing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degrees in the United States. According to a new rule of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), international science students in the US may now participate in "optional practical training" (OPT) for a longer duration.

Typically, all international students in the US are eligible for a one-year OPT after completing their degree course. STEM students used to get an additional 17-month extension. The new rule, which comes into effect from May 10, will allow STEM students a 24-month extension.

Thiya Mukherjee, a PhD student of plant biology in Texas Tech University, the US, decodes the implications.

"In the US, once you get a degree you are no longer a student. You might still have a valid visa, but to maintain your immigration status you need a valid permit and that is provided by OPT. You can only start working — in my case a post-doc job — if you have an OPT. Once you get a job and your OPT expires, you need to get an H1B visa to stay in the US," Mukherjee says.

In effect, what the new OPT does is ease the pressure that students find themselves under to secure a suitable job in the US. "The new rule offers a wonderful opportunity for students who would otherwise have a limited time-frame to apply for and qualify for an H-1B work visa status (that allows US employers to temporarily employ foreign workers in specialised occupations). This often seems to be a goal for students in STEM fields," says Jeffrey Pannell, a student exchange programme specialist at Nafsa, an association of international educators in the US.

According to a recent report by the Institute of International Education, a non-profit organisation that studies trends on international student exchange in the US, of the 132,888 Indian students currently enrolled in US universities and colleges, 76.8 per cent are in the STEM fields.

Says David L. Di Maria, associate provost, office of international programmes, Montana State University, "Indian students will take full advantage of the unique opportunity."

So why is STEM so attractive to Indian students? According to Arindam Roy, director of EdX-Care International, an educational consultancy based in Calcutta, STEM fields attract Indian students because most American stu-



Uncle Sam wants you

Indian students pursuing STEM degrees in the US will now have more time after graduation to look for jobs, thanks to a new rule, says Chandana Chandra

dents don't want to go through the rigours of science studies and research. "The US government always had and will keep luring the best brains from India as the STEM work force.

This is why today you see the likes of Satya Nadella (CEO of Microsoft) and Sundar Pichai (CEO of Google) heading top technology companies," he says.

Post study work is key to attracting students from interna-

tional markets to the universities, says Ravi Lochan Singh, managing director, Global Reach, a foreign education consultancy. "Students invest significant amounts for fees and living costs and it is only fair they be allowed to top up their academic training with some practical employment or work-based experiences," he points out.

Singh adds that the UK is the only country that removed post

study work and this actually resulted in a significant drop in student numbers. The US, of course, offers OPT, and countries such as Australia and New Zealand have been offering post study work to enhance their appeal.

"Work experience through OPT provides students with valuable international exposure. This is an attractive feature of the American education regulations for international students," says

Sudarshan Saha, Education USA advising coordinator, United States-India Educational Foundation (USIEF), American Center, Calcutta.

Abhishek Roy Chowdhury, who is working as a post-doctoral fellow at Stevens Institute of Technology, New Jersey, is hopeful. "This new rule will give me ample time and flexibility to apply for an H1B visa."

However, everything is not hunky dory for students who wish to be a part of the STEM work force. First and foremost, they have to find a suitable opportunity. "Far too many Indian students come with big dreams but many of them don't get the right employer to enjoy the STEM and OPT extension, or the H1B visa," says Zahir Ahmed, executive director, international education and services, South East Missouri State University. He points out how hundreds of Indian students are deported unceremoniously from the US because they choose fake institutes and fraudulent employers.

Also, the new rule, while giving students the benefit of time, is stricter than the old one. "During the STEM extension period students may only work for employers who are electronic-

ly verified," says Sugata Das, a manager with Global Reach. The employers have to declare that they are not discriminating against any US employee while recruiting a foreign student. They also have to submit an annual report on job performance.

"If you are not delivering your best at work, there is a possibility that you might end up losing your job under this new rule," warns Roy Chowdhury. "Besides, your job has to be related to your field of study."

In other words, you can't work in a cafeteria or a fast food outlet if

The new rule

- The OPT extension is only for students with STEM degrees from accredited schools
- The new OPT extension of 24 months will come into effect from May 10
- The extension is only for students who are employed by an electronically verified employer
- Employers participating in STEM OPT must incorporate a formal training programme that includes learning objectives

you are pursuing a PhD in the STEM field. The new rule will restrict international students who try to misuse the OPT to get a work visa in the US, without pursuing a STEM career.

Despite these bottlenecks, most students are upbeat about the changes in the OPT rule. Abhijit Kumar Baruah, an MSc student from Assam and a PhD aspirant in

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Mathematics at the University of Delaware, is happy. "Maths and its allied branches are the least competitive disciplines in the STEM category. Anybody who completes a graduate degree in these is sure to be rewarded in the US or, for that matter, anywhere in the world." He believes that a 12-month period is good enough for a maths or stats graduate to figure out a career option. "Thirty-six months is the icing on the cake for us," says the student enrolled at EdX-Care International.

Additional reporting by Prasun Chaudhuri

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