

# Immigrants with advanced degrees unable to stay in U.S. because of cap on visas

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**IOWA CITY, IA.** — Kazeem Olanrewaju is scheduled to be deported this summer from Iowa, a place that he has grown to love.

The Nigeria native, who holds an expiring student visa, said the situation confounds him. Olanrewaju, 38, sought to enter the U.S. workforce with engineering expertise in a nation starved for skilled workers.

Yet because of annual caps on the number of work visas issued, thousands of immigrants with advanced degrees annually face the prospect of being forced to leave the U.S. It's a situation that has existed for years and has not yet been resolved by Congress.

Olanrewaju, who dreams of one day becoming a U.S. citizen, could receive a reprieve. Congressional leaders and President Barack Obama have pledged to address immigration policy this year, though there is disagreement on whether to pursue one comprehensive bill or pass targeted legislation.

After nearly eight years in the U.S., Olanrewaju last May earned a doctorate in chemical and biochemical engineering from the University of Iowa. American taxpayers paid for much of the \$149,500 in tuition and fees it cost to earn master's and doctor's degrees because he earned a full scholarship, he said.

Forcing graduates like Olanrewaju to leave the U.S. will hurt an economy that faces a shortage of highly skilled workers in coming years, immigration reform advocates said.

"I don't think it's wise or makes any sense to spend that kind of money on someone, then leave them to struggle for themselves," Olanrewaju said.

Those who want to restrict immigration cite fraud, and argue foreign workers can replace or suppress the wages of Americans because of inadequate labor market safeguards for U.S. citizens.

The type of visas for high-skilled workers are called H-1Bs.

A federal report found fraud, which included providing false documents and not paying a worker the prevailing wage, in 13 percent of H-1B visa applications.

This was more common in applications for workers sponsored by smaller companies filling jobs that didn't require science, technology, engineering or math expertise, according to a 2008 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services study of high-skill H-1B visas.

## **Congress eyes STEM visas**

One policy with wide support, though, awards visas to workers with expertise in the high-demand areas of science, technology, engineering and math, said Des Moines attorney Lori Chesser, a member of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs immigration task force.

“There’s a broad recognition that the STEM area is one that’s a critical need,” Chesser said.

The STEM Jobs Act passed by the House in November was doomed from the start. Democrats opposed it because it would have eliminated an equal number of visas in the diversity visa lottery program, which awards visas to a mix of low- and high-skilled workers. The president also opposed the legislation for similar reasons.

The bill would have created 55,000 green card visas that grant permanent residence to immigrants with advanced degrees, but stamped out an equal amount from the lottery program.

International students like Olanrewaju have a difficult time remaining in the U.S. because demand exceeds supply for both green cards, which grant permanent residence, and temporary work permits.

To earn a green card, an employer must sponsor Olanrewaju. But the process is so long — it can take several years — and expensive that companies prefer to hire people who already have papers, Chesser said.

Each country must be awarded no more than 7 percent of the total number of green cards, so the wait is several years longer for countries like Mexico and China, which have a high number of applicants.

An annual allotment of 85,000 H-1B visas was filled last year in just 10 weeks. It took 33 weeks the prior year, federal statistics show. The visas expire after six years.

Business leaders have long lobbied to let more immigrants work in the U.S. to meet industry demand. About 140,000 work visas are granted nationally each year. However, in Iowa alone, state officials expect a 185,788 worker shortage by 2018.

There could be a 230,000 shortfall of advanced degrees in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math in the U.S. by 2018, according to a study by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, located in Washington, D.C.

“We’ve got so many students on our campuses who come here, get their Ph.D.’s, master’s, and because of unavailability of visas, they go back home,” said Tej Dhawan, who mentors entrepreneurs at StartupCity Des Moines, a technology business incubator.

## **Friends get degrees, thrive in Canada**

It didn't have to come to this for Olanrewaju, who volunteers at a biodiesel co-op near Iowa City while he job hunts and monitors congressional action. He could have moved to Canada, like several of his former classmates at a Swedish university where they all earned master's degrees.

Olanrewaju chose to pursue his dream of living in the U.S., something he said he had wanted to do since he was a boy. Back then, he said he knew two facts about the country: America possessed great power and Ronald Reagan was president.

Things have not yet turned out as Olanrewaju had hoped. The group that earned doctorates in Canada are now citizens of that country and have established careers at a nuclear reactor, a manufacturing plant and as vice president of an economic development firm, Olanrewaju said.

Last fall, one of them ran for mayor of Regina, the nearly 200,000-person capital of Saskatchewan, a province that borders North Dakota and Montana.

The Canadian province, under a national immigration policy that targets visas to match local needs, sponsors immigrants who are long-haul truck drivers, family members, doctors and recent graduates with advanced degrees.

The mayoral candidate, Meka Okochi, 35, a Canadian citizen since 2009, finished third with 17 percent of the vote.

"We encourage all our friends in America to come here. It's a faster path to citizenship," said Okochi, who nevertheless understands why people remain in the U.S. "America is the land of dreams. There's a romantic belief in hope. I don't think any other country has that, and Kazeem doesn't want to give up on that."

### **Invested in America, yearning to stay**

Olanrewaju has long resisted his friends' overtures to move north, and said he has no plans to abandon the country and the people he holds dear.

Olanrewaju said he would prefer not to leave Iowa City, though he came close to landing a job in Michigan. The interview went well enough that they discussed salary. But near the end of the process, he said, the recruiter asked the dreaded question: "Do you have a green card?"

Olanrewaju said he is invested in the country that first invested in him. He closely monitors Congress by watching C-SPAN, the cable TV channel. He can talk about the fiscal cliff, name all the members of the U.S. Supreme Court and tell you why the STEM Jobs Act failed.

Olanrewaju has established many friendships in Iowa City and leads a fellowship every Sunday after morning service at the Good News Bible Church behind a Kmart department store.

The university town, which seemed so deserted when he arrived on a cold January day in 2005 during winter break, has become a part of who he is.

“In all the places I’ve lived on the surface of this Earth, this is the second place I’ve lived most of my life, compared to Nigeria,” Olanrewaju said.

“I struggle with (moving away). It makes me feel as if I’m leaving my city, my native place. It’s not something that comes easily.”

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