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HEADLINE: America closes the door to scientific progress: ALAN LESHNER:

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BODY:

Science is a collaborative enterprise. Advances are rarely made by lone geniuses in ivory towers; instead they are the fruit of co-operation by scholars of all nationalities. Yet some American policymakers seem to be disregarding this truth. A vast backlog in processing visa applications is preventing thousands of students from taking their places at US universities. To make matters worse, some politicians appear to be questioning the right of these people to study in the US at all.

While the delays in visa processing are a result of understandable security concerns, the scale of the problem is unacceptable. In 2000, only 1,000 non-immigrant visa applications were flagged for review under the Mantis programme, one of several US screening systems. By 2002, that number had risen to 14,000. According to John Marburger, the president's science adviser, 1,000 cases are under Mantis review at any one time.

More and more cases are being set aside for even more detailed screening. In Riyadh, for example, the percentage of Saudi visa applicants subjected to interviews jumped from 2.5 per cent before the September 11 attacks to 43 per cent by April 2002, according to the US General Accounting Office. Further processing slowdowns are inevitable, given the State Department's new plan to interview nearly all those seeking visa entry to the US. Already its visa-issuing offices have been overwhelmed by the swift growth in cases under review, with the result that many overseas students hoping to start - or resume - their studies in the US this September face interminable delays.

To be fair, the government seems to be waking up to the problem. Mr Marburger has pledged to tackle the delays in reviewing student visa applications. The House of Representatives science committee is also investigating, and further hearings may take place next month.

Unfortunately, these positive developments are offset by signs that some politicians are adopting a xenophobic attitude to foreign students. Some members of Congress have hinted that these students are taking slots that should be reserved for Americans. If only foreign students were not snapping up all the best university openings, a few policymakers have implied, homegrown talent would be thriving. Dana Rohrabacher, the Californian congressman, recently argued that "US taxpayers pay a lot" for higher education, and thus "should not be competing (with foreign students)".

International students do indeed play a big role in US universities. In 2000, temporary visa holders made up 36 per cent of all graduate enrolments in US science and engineering courses, according to the Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology (CPST). Some areas, such as computer science and engineering, struggle to get enough qualified American applicants.

But as Shirley Tilghman, president of Princeton University, pointed out in response to Mr Rohrabacher, the answer lies in helping US students compete, not

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in squashing the competition that will in any case follow them into the workplace. That means better science education in schools and efforts to persuade more women and ethnic minorities to enter the science pipeline.

Moves to bar international students could cost America dear. International students enrich the learning environment, contributing scientific discoveries and billions of dollars to the US economy: during the 2001-02 academic year, 583,000 international students were expected to contribute nearly Dollars 12bn to the American economy, according to the Institute of International Education and the Association of International Educators.

While the need to ensure national security is indisputable, legitimate applications from students seeking to improve the welfare of their native countries - by becoming physicians, scientists and teachers - must not become snared in red tape. Those blocked from US universities can never learn about US culture or help to change the way others think about America.

Xenophobia is not the answer to security concerns. America must safeguard the advances that are likely to benefit all its citizens by upholding the tradition of scientific openness. The country's future competitiveness depends on its ability to create an inclusive learning environment. That means not only reaching out to women and ethnic minorities, but also welcoming researchers born outside the US.

The writer is chief executive of the **American Association for the Advancement of Science**

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