

Optional Practical Training (OPT)

What is OPT?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a period during which undergraduate and graduate students with F-1 status who have completed or have been pursuing their degrees for more than one academic year are permitted by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to work for one year on a student visa towards getting practical training which is directly related to their program of study.

Types of employment on OPT:

The OPT application process involves two stages: first you must apply for an OPT recommendation on your I-20. Then you must submit an I-765 Application for Employment Authorization to USCIS, including a signed copy of your OPT I-20 and other evidence.

Maintaining status on OPT

- You must work at least 20 hours per week
- You must work in a field/position related to your degree
- You must perform suitable work for your degree level
- You must report your employment using your SEVP Portal or through your DSO

When should I apply for OPT?

You can apply for OPT up to 90 days before and up to 60 days after your expected program completion date.

USCIS must receive your full and complete OPT application no more than 60 days after your expected program completion date.

In addition, USCIS must receive your application within 30 days of when your DSO recommends your I-20 for OPT.

You must be physically present in the U.S. at the time that USCIS receives your OPT application.

Steps for applying for OPT at Sofia University:

STEP ONE

- Students can start the OPT application process in their final quarter.
- Review the OPT Application Guidelines which will be shared by DSO.
- Complete the OPT Request Form via SignNow. This will need to be approved by Registrar and your academic advisor to confirm your anticipated graduation date.

STEP TWO

- The International Student Office will email a new I-20 with the OPT recommendation on page 2.
- Within 30 days after the OPT recommendation has been made in SEVIS by DSO, the student must complete and submit the Form I-765 to USCIS. We strongly recommend you create an online account with USCIS and file the form online.

STEP THREE

- OPTIONAL: Make an appointment with the DSO to review all your documentation before submitting the I-765 Application to USCIS.
- Students should retain copies of all submitted documents
- Students will be required to pay the OPT processing fee after the OPT is approved by USCIS.

Factors to consider when choosing your requested OPT start date

As part of the OPT I-20 request process, you must request a particular OPT start date. This is the day on which you would like to start your OPT work authorization.

The requested start date must be within 60 days of your program completion date. It can be as early as the day after your completion date and up to 60 days after that.

It is not guaranteed that you will be approved for the start date you request. Your approved start date will appear on your EAD card and may be later than your requested start date, depending on when you apply for OPT and how long it takes USCIS to approve it. Please note that you may not begin working until your approved EAD start date, regardless of the requested date on your I-20.

USCIS now accepts premium processing for I-765 OPT applications. The student can request Premium Processing by submitting the Form I-907 and paying the fee. If the student applies with premium processing, the application will be adjudicated within 30 days. If the student receives an Request for Evidence (RFE), once the student responds to the RFE, USCIS will have another 30 days to make a decision on your application. The premium processing timeframe starts again once USCIS receives your RFE response, so the overall processing time may be extended

If you plan to travel, especially internationally, you may not want to select a start date during this time. If you have a job offer, discuss with your employer an appropriate start date based on when you have applied for your OPT (consider the 90-180 day processing time).

If you do not have a job offer, you should consider where you are in your job search and when jobs typically start in your field and make your best estimate of when you would like to begin working. Days of unemployment only begin after the approved start date listed on your EAD.

Weigh the pros and cons of an early vs. late start date. If you choose an earlier start date, you may be able to begin your employment earlier, however, if you don't find a job you will begin accruing unemployment days sooner. If you choose a later starting date, your unemployment days would begin accruing later, however, you will have to wait longer to be able to begin employment.

Monitoring and tracking application status

The first week: After submitting your OPT Application to USCIS, you should be able to download your Receipt Notice from the online account. This should also include your Receipt Number, which you can use to check your status online.

Within 30-45 days: You will receive an I-797C Receipt Notice to your mailing address confirming the date of receipt and your receipt number. Keep this notice safe as it is your official proof that your OPT application was submitted. You may need it for travel or other purposes. If there are any errors in the receipt notice in your name, address, or application type, contact your DSO at Sofia University.

Around 90-120 days: You should receive an I-797 Notice of Approval letter and EAD card to your mailing address. These can come separately or at the same time. Check your EAD card for the

correct information. You can start working on your EAD start date. If there are any errors on the EAD, contact your DSO immediately.

2 Weeks after receiving EAD card: You should receive your Social Security Card (if you requested one).

Checking your OPT application status:

When you receive your USCIS I-797 Notice of Action (receipt notice), go to USCIS Case Status Online (and enter your receipt number). Note that your application will most likely stay in received status for the entirety of the processing time until it is approved. We strongly recommend that you sign for an account with USCIS to track your case status more closely.

Making changes to your OPT application after submission to USCIS:

Generally, you cannot change anything except for your mailing address.

Can I work on or off campus while waiting for my EAD?

Once you complete your degree, you cannot work on-campus or off-campus until you have the EAD in your possession and your selected start date has arrived, even if your USCIS case status indicates that your application is approved.

Can I start working without pay while waiting for my EAD?

No, work that is normally paid requires employment authorization. You must have the EAD card in hand and can only work after the EAD effective date.

Can I travel while my OPT is pending?

Travel during the OPT application process is allowed, but not recommended as it poses certain risks. You will need the appropriate documents to re-enter the U.S and keep in mind the following risks:

- You will need to have someone monitor your mail and let you know if you receive any communications from USCIS.
- If you receive a Request for Evidence, you will need to respond by a certain deadline.
- If you are denied for OPT while outside the U.S., you will not be able to re-enter or reapply.
- If you are approved for OPT while outside the U.S., you will need your EAD card sent to you to re-enter.

- If your F-1 visa is expired, you will need to re-apply for an F-1 visa with your EAD card and proof of employment.

Maintaining F-1 Status on OPT

You must report any changes with your DSO or through your SEVIS portal. You should receive an email with instructions on SEVIS portal access after your I-765 Approval.

During OPT, report changes to any of the following to the school, within 10 days of the change:

- Legal name changes
- Change in residential or mailing address
- Change in employment (either new employment or changes in employment)
- Change in immigration status – includes the filing of an H-1B petition on your behalf, an application for adjustment of status, or any other change in immigration status.
- Early departure from the U.S. – If you decide to not use your OPT, or to depart the U.S. before the end of your OPT with no intention of returning as an F-1 Student.

Unemployment

You do not need to have a job offer at the time you petition your OPT request. Do not accrue more than 90 days of unemployment. If you exceed 90 days of unemployment, your SEVIS record will automatically terminate, and you will need to leave the U.S. immediately.

Travelling on OPT

When traveling internationally on OPT after you receive your I-765 Approval and EAD, you will need to carry the following documents:

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 Visa
- Valid OPT I-20 (with travel signature no older than six months)
- EAD Card
- Job offer letter

If you do not have all of these documents, traveling internationally is risky.

You must always be in F-1 Status to work on OPT. If you travel internationally with an expired F-1 Visa, you will need to apply for another F-1 Visa before returning to the U.S.

After successful completion of OPT, you will have a 60-day grace period to depart the U.S.
(beginning after OPT ends)