Optional Practical Training (OPT) 24-Month STEM Extension: 
Frequently Asked Questions 
Students in F-1 Status

Overview

What is the STEM Optional Practical Training (OPT) Extension?
STEM Optional Practical Training (STEM OPT) is a 24-month extension directly following post-completion OPT. STEM OPT is an opportunity to expand on previous academic training through a bona-fide employer-employee relationship. Students who completed a STEM-related major may qualify for the STEM extension, and employment must be related to the STEM major field of study.

What steps must I take in order to complete the STEM OPT application process?
1. Complete Form I-983 Training Plan with employer
2. Apply for STEM OPT in Cystart
3. Receive e-mail from ISSO to pick up STEM OPT I-20
4. Gather STEM OPT application documents
5. STEM OPT application review by ISSO (optional)
6. Mail STEM OPT application to USCIS
7. Receive receipt notice (Complete new I-9 with employer, if necessary)
8. Wait 90 days (or more) for adjudication
9. Receive EAD card in the mail
10. Complete new I-9 with employer

Eligibility

What are the general eligibility criteria for STEM OPT?
- Students who are in valid F-1 status
- Students who are currently in a 12-month period of post-completion OPT
- Students whose degree programs are included on the STEM Designated Degree Programs List
  - The major code, or CIP code, on page 1 of Form I-20 must be listed on the STEM Designated Degree Program list
- Student who has a previous STEM-designated degree earned in past 10 years from a SEVP-certified educational institution

Who is not eligible for STEM OPT?
- Students who majored in programs that are not included on the STEM Designated Degree Programs List
- Students who have received a STEM extension at a higher educational degree level or have already used two prior periods of STEM OPT
- Students whose period of post-completion OPT has ended

What are the eligibility requirements for STEM employment?
- Student’s employer during the 24-month extension period is enrolled in the E-Verify Program
- Student must have a bona fide employer/employee relationship for completion of Form I-983
- Student must be employed a minimum of 20 hours per week with the STEM employer
Are temporary agencies or contractual work STEM-eligible?
Please schedule an appointment with an International Student Advisor to discuss the associated risks of applying for a STEM extension based on employment with a temporary agency or contractual employment.

Duration of OPT
How is the time determined for the STEM OPT extension?
Students receive an additional 24 months directly following the end date listed on the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) for the current post-completion OPT.

Can I request more than one STEM OPT extension?
Yes, students are permitted two STEM OPT extensions over their lifetime. STEM OPT must follow a period of post-completion OPT, in order to be eligible and apply.

Step 1: Cystart Request
How do I submit the e-form request?
- STEM OPT requests can be submitted through an electronic process in Cystart. Students must use the Limited Services Cystart page and request a pin for access. To request assistance accessing the Limited Services Cystart page, please e-mail ISSO at isso@iastate.edu.
- Once a student has gained access to the Limited Services Cystart page, complete and submit the OPT STEM Extension request found under F-1 Student Services tab.

What documents must I submit as part of the e-form request?
- Form I-983 Training Plan completed by student and employer
- If based on previous degree: Diploma, transcripts, and previous I-20
- If working at ISU during extension: Letter of intent
  - Hiring or host department must complete the ISU Employment Verification section of the OPT STEM Extension request form

What is Form I-983?
Form I-983 is a training plan that the student and employer must complete prior to applying for STEM OPT. The completed Form I-983 will be reviewed by an International Student Advisor before issuance of the STEM OPT I-20. For instructions or to view Form I-983, please visit the Study in the States website.

What is the approximate timeline for ISSO to process this request?
It can take up to 10 working days once the e-form has been submitted and, if working at ISU, ISSO has received approval from the ISU supervising department. Once the request is approved, ISSO will send an e-mail to the ISU e-mail address on file notifying the student to pick up their new STEM OPT I-20. ISSO recommends sending an e-mail to isso@iastate.edu if an e-mail has not been received within 10 working days.

When do I submit my STEM OPT request to ISSO?
- Up to 120 days prior to the end date on the post-completion OPT EAD
- No later than 2 weeks before the end date on the post-completion OPT EAD

When will U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) accept my STEM OPT application?
- Up to 90 days prior to the end date on the post-completion OPT EAD
- No later than the end date listed on the EAD
What is the approximate timeline from submitting this request to ISSO to receipt of EAD?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 working days</td>
<td>ISSO processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 working days</td>
<td>Mailing time (if using FedEx)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 calendar days (or longer)</td>
<td>USCIS processing</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 calendar days</td>
<td>Issuance and mailing of the Employment Authorization Document (EAD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 working days</td>
<td>Mailing time if student is no longer in Ames</td>
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**Step 2: Application to USCIS**

Do I need to meet an International Student Advisor to complete my application?
No, students will meet with another staff member of ISSO. Follow the instructions in the e-mail sent by ISSO.

What documents must I submit to complete my application?
- $410 personal check or money order made payable to U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Two identical, passport style photographs taken within the past 30 days
- Printed copy of the completed Form I-765 typed
- Printed copy of the completed Form G-1145 typed
- Copy of official ISU transcript, which lists major and degree earned
- Copy of diploma (optional)
- Copy of new I-20 signed by International Student Advisor and student with STEM OPT recommendation on page 2
- Letter from employer verifying current employment and duties related to major and degree earned
- Copy of each of the following immigration documents:
  - I-94 card, front and back of original or print out of electronic I-94
  - Passport identity page
  - Passport page showing expiration date of passport
  - Passport page with most recent F-1 visa
  - I-20 forms with prior OPT endorsements on page 3, if any
  - Previous EAD from USCIS, if any

What more can you tell me about the required passport photographs?
For more information, see the Department of State's passport photo requirements.

**Step 3: Mailing to USCIS**

What steps should I take if I want to mail the final application myself?
- Wait for the new STEM OPT I-20 to be sent to you by mail. Once received, sign and date the I-20 in blue ink.
- Put the final application together in the order listed above, ensuring the check is on top.
- Review the final application one last time to ensure the dates are correct, signatures are included, and all documents are signed within 30 days of USCIS receiving the application.
- Upload scanned copy of your entire application in Cystart, under "OPT Application Upload."
  - Include copies of all documents included in the final application as ISSO would need to reference these if the USCIS sends a Request for Evidence (RFE) to follow-up on your OPT application.
How should I mail the application if I choose to mail it myself?
ISSO recommends using FedEx for mailing and saving a scanned image of the complete application.

Where should I mail the application if I choose to mail it myself?
Find where to send the application here.

Pending STEM OPT Application
Can I continue working while USCIS processes my STEM OPT application?
If the STEM OPT application is properly and timely filed, students are permitted to continue working for 180 days following the end date on the post-completion OPT EAD. Students will receive a I-797 receipt notice, which can be used to complete the I-9 Employment Eligibility Verification Form. If the STEM OPT application is denied, students must stop working immediately.

How will I know USCIS has received my application?
USCIS will send an e-mail and/or text message. USCIS will also send the official I-797 Receipt Notice to the address listed on the Form I-765. It can take approximately 2 weeks to receive the e-mail or text message from the date the STEM OPT application is received.
- If a student has not received an e-mail or text message after 2 weeks, they should first contact their bank to ask if their check for the STEM OPT application fee has been cashed by USCIS. Second, if necessary, contact ISSO by e-mail at isso@iastate.edu.

What if there is an error on my receipt notice?
Contact ISSO at isso@iastate.edu.

How do I check the status of my application?
Go to USCIS Case Status and enter the receipt number found on the receipt notice.

How long will it take USCIS to process my STEM OPT application?
USCIS has stated that they will try to process STEM OPT applications within 90 days of receiving the application, however it could take longer for the application to be approved.

What is the average time from when the decision is made and when the EAD arrives at ISSO?
USCIS has indicated it can take up to 30 days before your EAD is produced and mailed. ISSO generally receives the EAD within 10 days after USCIS says it has been delivered.

How will I know my EAD card has arrived at ISSO?
Once ISSO receives the EAD, ISSO will send an e-mail to the student’s ISU e-mail account. If it has been more than 10 days since the USCIS Case Status system indicates the EAD card has been delivered, contact ISSO at isso@iastate.edu.

What do I need to do to pick up my EAD from ISSO?
- Students may come themselves. A photo ID such as a passport, ISU card, driver's license is required to pick up the EAD.
- Students may designate someone else to pick up the EAD. To do so, students must e-mail Liz Stapes at lstapes@iastate.edu and specify the person who will pick up the EAD.
- Students may request the EAD to be mailed to their location. Request the card to be mailed by completing a Mailing Authorization e-form request in Cystart.
What if I want to withdraw my OPT application?
Contact ISSO immediately at isso@iastate.edu to start the withdrawal process. Students will not receive a refund of the application fee.

How can I renew my driver’s license when my STEM OPT application is pending?
Each state’s Department of Transportation (DOT) has different policies regarding extending licenses while applications are pending. Students should request that their information be entered in the SAVE program. Once entered, students can check their application on the SAVE self-check system. Once the application has cleared, students can return to the DOT to inquire after their driver’s license extension.

During STEM OPT

How many days of unemployment are allowed during STEM OPT?
Students receive an additional 60 days of unemployment for STEM OPT. This is in addition to the 90 days given for post-completion OPT. Students on STEM OPT have a total period of 150 days of unemployment.

What are the consequences of exceeding the 150 days of unemployment on STEM OPT?
Students who exceed the 150 days of unemployment are out of status and must leave the U.S. Students should keep sufficient records of unemployment and consult an International Student Advisor to discuss options prior to exceeding the 150 days of unemployment.

Can I change employers during STEM OPT?
Students may change employers during STEM OPT, but the new employer must meet all STEM OPT eligibility requirements:
- Employer is enrolled in E-Verify
- Employment is at least 20 hours per week and directly related to degree
- Employer must be willing to complete Form I-983 with student, which must be submitted to ISSO within 10 days of starting employment

Can I take classes during STEM OPT?
The regulations indicate your OPT is automatically terminated when you begin study at another educational level or if you transfer to another institution.

Travel and STEM OPT

Can I travel outside the U.S. while STEM OPT is pending?
- If return date is before end date of post-completion OPT EAD, students may travel outside the U.S. with necessary documents listed below
- If return date is after end date of post-completion OPT EAD, students are advised not to travel outside of the U.S. until they have received STEM OPT EAD
Can I travel outside the U.S. after STEM OPT is approved?
Yes, F-1 students may travel outside of the U.S. while on STEM OPT. However, there are some associated risks with travel on STEM OPT. Students must carry additional documentation and may experience heightened scrutiny at the border. ISSO recommends students carry the following documents while travelling:
- Valid passport
- Valid visa
- I-20 with travel signature
  - Travel signatures are valid for 6 months while on OPT
- EAD card
- Verification of employment: letter documenting employment with company, tax documents, pay stubs, etc.

Reporting Requirements
What are the reporting requirements during STEM OPT?
- Students must update their living address in Accessplus and Cystart every 6 months and within 10 days of moving
- Students must update employer information in Cystart when changing employers
- Students and/or employers must notify ISSO within 5 days of employment termination or departure
- Students must update Form I-983 within 10 days of any of the following circumstances:
  - At the completion of 12 month evaluation (page 6)
  - At the completion of 24 month evaluation (page 7)
  - For each new employer
  - Material changes or deviations to the Training Plan occur

How do I submit reporting requirements to ISSO?
To report any of the changes listed above, students must complete the OPT STEM Reporting Requirements request in Cystart.

Disclaimer: This Frequently Asked Questions document is intended for general information and guidance. Please consult with an International Student and Scholar Advisor in the International Students and Scholars Office regarding your individual request.