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TO: Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration
RE: Impact of COVID-19 on the Immigration System

November 27, 2020

Members of the Committee,

Migrant Students United is an organization of current and former international students in nine provinces, and the only national representative body of current and former migrant students in Canada.

We call on you to take urgent action to support migrant students impacted by COVID-19:

1. **Ensure real access to PR:** Make post-graduate work permits renewable; Lower points requirements for PR (CRS); Count work that is part-time, in-school, and in any occupation towards PR; and ensure full and permanent immigration status for all migrants;
2. **Fix rules around work:** Remove time-limits and industry restrictions on work;
3. **Unite families:** Allow families to travel; Ensure work permits for family members.
4. **Lower tuition and ensure full services:** Work with provincial partners to ensure migrant students pay domestic tuition; and have full access to all services including healthcare, housing, jobs, scholarships, pandemic emergency benefits, and in-school support; Ensure immediate access to Social Insurance Numbers.

The reasons for our recommendations are as follows:

1. The crisis faced by post-graduate work permit holders and other graduated students during COVID-19

After completing their studies, international students receive time-restricted post graduate work permits (PGWPs) during which they are required to complete 12-24 months of high-waged and high-skilled work to qualify for permanent residency (PR). With COVID-19 related job losses worsening again in the second wave, most graduates do not have access to jobs, particularly the NOC 0, A and B jobs required for PR. Despite living here for years, building relationships and communities, thousands of migrants face deportation if work permits are not renewed. These are potential immigrants who have lived and studied here, and perform skilled, and essential work in Canada. They are being punished for a crisis not of their making.

According to recent IRCC data, over 17,000 one and two-year work permits were issued between September 2019 and June 2020. Many will certainly not be able to complete the work required for PR.

Others who previously received three-year permits but only recently acquired NOC 0, A or B positions and have not been able to complete 12-24 months before COVID-19 are also in crisis.

Migrant Students United has held over a dozen online and in-person meetings since mid-March, where we have directly connected with over 600 former students. As a result, we launched two petitions, calling for renewal of work permits and support for international students during COVID-19. Over 16,500 people have signed on.

Many are in crisis, including people like [Michelle, a mother from Jamaica with an expired permit](#): “I came here in 2018 looking for a better life. When I got my permit in October, I said, “Yes, this is it,” until COVID came in. That basically wiped everything away because everything closed down: nothing is happening and nobody is calling you. You feel drained because you see the time going. I only got a one year post graduate work permit, and I could see the time going every month, and [my PGWP] finally ended last week. So I’m barely holding onto hope right now, because I’ve spent everything coming here.”

[Shiva, a migrant student worker from Iran whose permit expired in October](#), also shared her story: “I spent three years of my life to come to Canada. I had a lot of dreams. I had a lot of plans. So now because of this pandemic, everything has changed. In a normal situation, finding a job is too hard and in the pandemic, the situation is worse. I was eager to get a full-time job and apply for PR. Now PR scores are too high and it’s impossible to apply for it without having Canadian experience and a full time job. The situation is terrible and very stressful.”

[Leo, an international student from Brazil, summarized](#): “It does not matter how hard I study or work to improve my score. The system keeps pushing me down. We come here on temporary permits, and are kept temporary. We have to meet impossible standards.”

Because of the important recent public policy change implemented by the federal government of Canada, migrants are able [restore their status until December 31st of this year](#). **Immigration Canada has already taken the first step, but former students must be included. This means making PGWPs renewable to allow post-graduates to avail of this opportunity before December 31st.** If the December 31st deadline is not met, we urge a restoration process for all students who have graduated in Canada.

2. The experience of Migrant Students during COVID-19

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we surveyed 2,300 current and former migrant students, held eleven online information sessions with over 2,000 students registered, and conducted focus groups and polling to determine migrant student needs and priorities. We have spoken with current and former students in each province, as well as the Northwest Territories. Here are their key concerns:

2A: ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Current and former migrant students in many provinces did not have access to COVID-19 testing or treatment. A patchwork of private insurance companies exist at public post-secondary institutions, but do not include private educational institutions. Students in between permits, those that have recently moved provinces, and those awaiting a full-time job, are not covered. Many students are removed from their support systems, don't have access to social networks they can rely on, and are in many cases without work. Extending universal coverage to these people is an essential public health measure.

2B: INCOME SUPPORT:

Many current or former migrant students have lost income. Campus closures and the overall economic downturn means that either jobs have been eliminated or hours of work drastically reduced. We have heard from hundreds of students forced to turn to food banks and religious spaces for basic necessities. Income supports were are inaccessible to many students for the following reasons:

- In some cases, migrant students had not accumulated enough hours for Employment Insurance or have not been paid \$5,000 in the previous 12 months.
- Many students did not have adequate documentation for wages they have been paid.
- Many are without an active Social Insurance Number because of immigration rules that require permit renewal. Work and study permit processing delays has meant that people are without income.
- Students are working at reduced hours just to survive.

Migrant students who are recent graduates report extreme difficulty in finding jobs in the current climate. Students who are still enrolled and need employment for program or co-op placements are struggling to get income. Some students and post-graduate work permit holders travelled abroad to take care of their families and are unable to access income supports, while their jobs here have laid them off.

2C: PERMIT PROCESSING and PERMANENT RESIDENCY DELAYS

Permit restrictions pose a myriad of challenges for migrant students that are simply insurmountable in this climate. Public post-secondary students are only allowed to work 20 hours off-campus, but campuses are closed. Students with applications in process are reporting delays and are falling into "implied status", where their SIN and health cards are expiring but cannot be reviewed because of Service Canada closures. While the exemption of some migrant students from border closures is a critical step, many spouses and family members of students haven't been allowed to enter because of lack of clarity on rules. Graduated students who are here with their spouses are unable to renew their spouses' work permits because they cannot find a high-waged job. Post-graduate work permit holders have been turned back from flights in various countries despite having active permits. Private college students don't have access to post-graduate work permits. Many are still in the country even if their courses are done because of closed borders or flight restrictions. The economic downturn has made it difficult for students to find work that can be counted towards their eventual permanent residence applications. Hundreds of post-graduate students are reporting that they won't be able to get enough points for permanent residency by the time their current work permits expire. Current and former

students are also facing deportations, often to places without healthcare support or where travel is shut off.

2D: DIFFICULTY PAYING BILLS AND TUITION FEES

Migrant students and post-graduate work permit holders arriving in Canada are required to enter quarantine but many are reporting they have nowhere to go, as campuses are closed, emergency accommodations have fallen through, and long-term rentals are unavailable. Many students suffering from job loss or cuts in wages are reporting difficulty paying high tuition fees. Many colleges and universities have reduced course offerings and cancelled Spring classes, but are continuing to charge fees. Across Canada, schools have dramatically increased tuition even as courses have shifted online and students and their families have lost wages. At the same time, maintaining enrollment is a requirement of the study permit.

I look forward to speaking with you soon on this urgent matter. I can be reached at sarom@migrantworkersalliance.org and 647-858-2854.

Thank you.

Sarom Rho
National Coordinator, Migrant Students United