Dear Secretary Blinken,

The Graduate Student Council (GSC) represents the nearly 7,000 graduate students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). We support policies that reduce unnecessary burdens for international students to come to the United States to pursue their graduate studies. In particular, we ask that the National Interest Exceptions, currently automatically granted to F-1 and J-1 visa holders from the Schengen Area, United Kingdom, Ireland, be expanded to include all F-1 and J-1 visa holders.

The inability of F-1 and J-1 visa holders from countries other than those part of the Schengen Area, United Kingdom, and Ireland to enter the United States to begin or continue their graduate studies generates unjustified disparities across the student body. These disruptions to graduate students’ studies also affect the broader scientific community by undermining the important contributions provided by these students to the American research ecosystem. The current disparity in which students are automatically granted the National Interest Exception is not clearly justified in any objective criteria. We therefore ask that all students be granted the National Interest Exception regardless of nationality.

Additionally, the process of applying for the National Interest Exception has been opaque, leaving students in the lurch of being able to take proactive steps to enter to the United States to begin or continue their studies. We thus ask for clear, specific guidance and a detailed timeline to be provided for the application of the National Interest Exception.

The emotional toll exacted on international students as a result of the disruptions has been significant, ranging from lost opportunities, to exacerbating mental health challenges. We would like to point you to some excerpts of international student testimonials below, which illustrate the tangible impacts that these regulations have had on the lives of international students. Further testimonials can also be provided on this topic on request for more information on the impact of this policy.

- “I'm uncertain whether I'll be able to continue my [Teaching Assistantship] remotely, and worried that it will be very disruptive to the rest of the teaching team if they have to find a replacement just before the start of classes. I'm concerned about the costs of healthcare for chronic conditions, since I can't use telehealth from overseas or get reimbursed for prescriptions. I'm also worried that I will lose my housing assignment.”

- “I haven't been able to leave the US to visit my family for over a year now. In a moment of world and emotional instability I would like to be self-isolate with my family.”

- “With the travel ban against China, I had to go to a third country (Cambodia was my choice) for fourteen days before I was allowed to enter [the United States]. This put undue financial and emotional stress on me - while juggling coursework and remote research at the end of the semester, I also had to scramble to figure out which country to go to and whether it's safe or economical to do so. I spent $1600 for the tickets to Cambodia and the lodging, and of course an extra trip also meant extra opportunities to catch COVID.”
If you would like to know more about the barriers that international students face as they seek further education opportunities in our country, or would like to discuss additional methods of reducing such barriers, please reach out to us at gsc-eab-fed@mit.edu.

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