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### **Medical Students take expertise offshore**

Valuable foreign medical students are being deterred from Australian study by anxiety about the graduate internship bottleneck, says global migration researcher, Professor Lesleyanne Hawthorne.

Professor Hawthorne is associate dean international at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences and says prospective international students are considering the internship – required to complete their qualification in Australia – as fundamental to their choice of where to study

“There's enormous anxiety about it,” says Professor Hawthorne. “I work across key source regions in North America and Asia and every student asks about internships. It's absolutely on their radar.”

She says agents in Singapore and Canada in particular have warned of a looming drop in Australian medical school applications as students cast around for more certain global destinations, with many looking to New Zealand as an alternative and some even to the not-so-certain UK system.”

Current numbers suggest that by 2014 there may be just 2014 internship places for a student population of 3786. At this stage, state governments guarantee domestic students an internship placement, but international students have no such certainty and suggestions such as merit-based internship allocation, being put forward by Dean of Medicine at the University of Melbourne James Angus, show little sign of being quick adoption.

President of the Medical Deans of Australia and New Zealand, Professor Justin Beilby from the University of Adelaide says the situation is becoming a financial issue for Australian medical schools and is a potential threat to the whole of campus foreign student market.

“If you turn off the international medical students, what does it do for the attractiveness of the whole tertiary sector for international students? I think that's high risk.”

Professor Hawthorne's comments were made after presenting new research about the movement of international medical students at the inaugural research forum for the medical students outcomes database (MSOD) and longitudinal tracking project. Her work on the database, which began tracking the demography, choices and careers of medical students through university and beyond in 2005, shows that by graduation more three quarters of international medical students want to remain in Australia and of those able to complete their internship here, 98 per cent remain.

It's something the medical deans insist shows that if internships could be provided, the international students would provide a much needed addition to our stretched medical workforce. Those international students most likely to stay are the Americans and the highly skilled and rapidly growing Canadian cohort – now comprising approximately one fifth of all commencing med students at the University of Queensland alone. For those that can't get internships, New Zealand and Singapore are only too happy to accept them into their programs and Hawthorne says they are already scouting Australian campuses on a regular basis.

Professor Beilby says that careful planning for 2012 – together with the innovative use of alternative placements beyond hospitals in aged care and general practice – means that they are confident there will be sufficient places to accommodate international students – even in the incredibly tight

NSW market. But substantial longer term modelling is needed to provide the long-term certainty required for students who are contemplating investing as much as \$200,000-plus in an Australian medical degree.

NSW Minister for Health, Jillian Skinner addressed the MSOD research forum and flagged that the issue of funding international graduate internship places would also need proper consideration as part of any long-term plans.

Annabel McGilvray

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