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Hospital intern plan risks exodus of foreign students

THE decision to guarantee internships in public hospitals only to domestic medical graduates risks forcing thousands of foreign students to leave Australia — while the nation imports thousands of overseas-trained doctors who are often less well-suited to Australian practice.

A report — called the first definitive analysis of medical students who have come to study in Australia — found that 79 per cent of the 546 overseas students secured an intern position in an Australian public hospital after graduating, allowing them to complete training and earn registration as doctors.

But it warns that this proportion is likely to fall given the steep rise in international enrolments, which went up by 223 per cent from 1999 to 2009 compared with the 52 per cent rise in domestic medical students.

The report, commissioned by Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand, representing the heads of the two countries' medical schools, found that while hospital positions were sufficient to absorb nearly all the international students who remained in Australia in recent years, this was likely to change because of the Council of Australian Governments' decision to guarantee internships only to domestic students.

Louis Landau, project director of the Medical Schools Outcomes Database, run by Medical Deans ANZ, said the study showed 60 per cent of foreign students were willing to work in under-resourced rural areas, and the fact they had trained in Australia meant they were more familiar with Australian practice and the health system while their English skills were also often better than recent older immigrants.

However, the sharp rise in medical school places — from 1100 a year to 3000, with rises to 3500 planned — meant it would be hard to absorb foreign students in the training system unless extra positions were opened up. "It's not that we should have an open slather . . . it's a matter of getting the balance right," Professor Landau said.

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