

22 October 2012

Foreign medical students fight for right to complete degrees

INTERNATIONAL medical graduates protested yesterday against being sent home with incomplete qualifications and individual debts of more than \$300,000 as the University of Sydney's dean of medicine warned of a "catastrophic" impact on the \$16 billion education export industry.

The students used a "car wash" protest at Taylor Square, Darlinghurst, to air their concerns over the impasse between the state and federal governments over who should pay for their year-long internships.

Bruce Robinson, dean of medicine at the University of Sydney, said the negative publicity was potentially "catastrophic" for Australia's \$16-billion-a-year international education industry. It was estimated the medical students paid up to \$84 million a year in fees to NSW universities.

"This [stand-off] will go around the world as being a negative from the point of view of any student wanting to come to study in NSW," he said.

Canadian Blaise Wardle, 30, completed the final exams of his four-year Sydney University degree a fortnight ago and had a \$300,000 debt to show for it.

He said he had formed a strong support network of mentors and friends so it would be "pretty difficult" to "start afresh" in North America. "It is just frustrating ... the real issue is that there are 150-180 trained doctors who might have to leave, not because we are not needed, but because no one wants to pay to keep us here," he said.

The federal Health Minister, Tanya Plibersek, offered \$10 million to fund 100 internships in the private sector, provided the states between them funded an additional 80 in public hospitals. But the NSW Health Minister, Jillian Skinner, said the onus to resolve the impasse was with the federal government.

NSW had added 290 internships since 2008 in response to rises in the numbers of domestic and international fee-paying students of 110 per cent and 90 per cent respectively since 2005, Mrs Skinner said.

International graduates should pay the cost of internships themselves, she suggested, noting that "international medical students pay fees to attend university but they have not been required to pay fees to fund the cost of intern training they receive after graduation".

Although overseas-trained doctors were "plugging a significant gap in the system", there were "more complaints and mishaps associated with [them]" than locally trained doctors, said Professor Robinson, citing a University of Melbourne study. "So there is data to support the notion we'd be better off having these locally trained international students."

Medical profession leaders said it made no sense to send the students packing because they were better suited to practise in Australian conditions than the 2500-plus foreign-trained doctors Australia imported annually.

“We need every single one of them to do internships and training positions to become the fully trained GPs and specialists that NSW and Australia needs,” Saxon Smith, vice president of the Australian Medical Association’s NSW branch, said.

Catherine Armitage
Sydney Morning Herald
22 October 2012