

On the well-being of international medical students

I chose to come and study medicine in Sydney, Australia over Dublin, Ireland because I thought that I would be happier here overall. Australia has nicer weather, beautiful beaches and a culture that closely resembles my own. Either choice would have had adverse effects on my financial well-being but I chose to accumulate debt paying an Australian University rather than an Irish one.

Initially it seemed that I had made the right choice but now that I have learned all of the facts about the internship situation in Australia I realize that it was the wrong one.

I feel used, I feel helpless and I feel angry, but most of all I feel stressed.

My future is uncertain, and my choices have been limited by a system that has been poorly managed.

I can try and go back to Canada or try to go to the US but my chances of getting into a competitive specialty in either place are slim; Australian programs only prepare us for an internship in the Australian system, not for a residency in the North American one. So I either have to take my chances on the competitive specialty that I want, or play it safe and apply to a less competitive one. If I am unable to get into a residency program it amounts to career suicide since I will quickly become 'de-skilled' if I am not able to work and further my career. I am sure that everyone can understand the stress caused by the idea of a quarter-million dollars of debt and no career to show for it. If the result of my education is not a career that can pay back the education fees, the co-signers for my loan will be on the hook. I've lost a lot of sleep worrying about this.

If Australia is short of doctors why is there no system for retaining Australian trained international students? Many of us would be happy to offer a return of service in exchange for a reasonable chance at an internship but there is no way for us to do so. Why has Australia increased the number of medical students to a level that exceeds the available internship places? Most importantly, why have international students been allowed to believe that we might be able to stay here if that is not the case?

Your own deputy Prime Minister said that international students "build on Australia's long multicultural history"¹ and announced, "international students are very welcome in this nation."² These statements create the impression that we are

¹ The Hon Julia Gillard, Speech: International Education – Its Contribution to Australia, 26 May 2009;
http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_090527_093411.aspx

² As Above.

welcome here as people who have something to contribute on a level other than financial, but the reality I have faced here is much different. The University of Sydney told us that they could not guarantee an internship place, and that was the truth. Unfortunately the truth can be told in a way that creates the wrong impression, as this statement did with many international medical students. The University is closer to being able to guarantee that we will not get an internship than it is to guaranteeing us one. Allowing us the impression that there is some chance when there is next to none may not be a lie but it is still dishonest. The reality is that the country and the University want the money provided by international students, and they are willing to say whatever it takes as long as no legal responsibility is incurred.

Some of us dreamed of studying here, building a life here and then adopting this country as our own. We were led to believe that this was possible, not explicitly, but it was implied. In the words of one of my Australian colleagues:

To offer that dream and so cynically undermine it, to acknowledge that dream's validity whilst compromising its survival, to use that dream to manipulate those who dare to dream it – (is) what the current policy does, and that's why it's reprehensible. I'm sure any Australian will agree. I know I do.

We feel used and angry but many of us are now stuck, and feeling helpless is much worse for well-being than feeling angry.

Medicine is an extremely demanding course, the additional stress related to our uncertain futures is overwhelming. For Australia to maintain competitive in the international education market things need to change. The current situation is not good for our well-being and I can not in good conscience allow anyone I know to make the same choice that I did.

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