

Students fly east for cheap degree

Prague is the low-fee alternative

Sian Griffiths and Ali Hussain

BRITISH medical students are heading for eastern European universities to beat fierce competition for places in the UK and the prospect of rising fees.

They calculate that the chances of being accepted on courses in countries such as the Czech Republic are better than at UK universities and that the cost, including living expenses, is lower.

The option has become increasingly attractive since the admission of more countries to the European Union last year. Doctors and dentists with degrees from within the EU are able to practise in Britain without taking conversion courses.

Among those studying at Charles University in Prague, capital of the Czech Republic, is Lauren McGuinness, a 19-year-old in the first year of a dentistry course. McGuinness, originally from Ireland, was offered a place to study at King's College London but chose Prague instead.

"When I was offered Prague I took it straight away," she said. "The place is just amazing. The course is definitely tough, it's not a place you go to as a back-up. The teachers all speak fluent English and they work you very hard."

"It's not the most luxurious place in the world to stay and I expected it to be cheaper, but it still works out to be much cheaper than living in London."

Zara Rehman, 19, from Bournemouth, is also studying dentistry at the university, founded in 1348. She said she was "pushed" abroad because of living expenses and shortage of places in Britain.

"Charles University is well recognised, it was relatively easy to get into and I get to see parts of Europe at the same time," she said.

Komal Ali, 20, a medical student from Preston, Lancashire, studying medicine, studied at the independent Kirkham Grammar, a girls' school near Preston. She chose Prague because of the strong competition for places in British medical schools.

The latest figures in Britain show that 17,826 students applied to UK medical schools in 2004, but only 7,955 were accepted. Some of the most popular universities had 17 applications per place. From next year such students will also face increased tuition fees of £3,000 a year. With courses for dentists lasting five years and six years for doctors, students face fees of at least £15,000 to £18,000.

Living expenses push debts even higher. Research by the British Medical Association (BMA) suggests that the average fifth-year medical student has debts of more than £19,000 and many owe £30,000.

After top-up fees kick in next year, UK medical students

Stanislav Peska



Ali, McGuinness and Rehman are studying in Prague because of high fees

the courses in the UK when it's cheaper to pay people to study and get good degrees elsewhere," said Kavesh.

According to the service, about 250 medical professionals working in the UK obtained degrees from Czech universities. Overall, Kavesh estimates there are about 700 British students studying for medical or dentistry degrees in the country.

He said: "In the past, many UK medical students would apply to Czech medical courses as an insurance policy. Now we are seeing people opting for Prague as a first choice."

Other eastern European countries offering places to British students include Croatia, Hungary, Latvia and Romania. Debreceen University, Hungary charges just over £24,000 for a medical degree, while Zagreb medical school in Croatia charges £29,000 for its six-year course taught in English.

Oreadea University in Roma-

nia has 12 medical students from Britain and points out that Romania will join the EU in 2007, making its qualifications widely acceptable.

The looming rise in fees has made other overseas universities attractive too. Some in Australia and New Zealand have offered financial help to students, although medical courses are not usually covered.

British doctors have reservations about the merits of studying overseas, if only because it may undermine the training system here and deprive poorer countries of their resources.

"Our ultimate aim should be to become self-sufficient, and stop depending on poorer countries to supply our doctors," said Paul Miller, chairman of the BMA's consultants committee. "There's no reason we shouldn't be able to achieve this — we're one of the richest countries in the world."

Additional reporting:

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