

Bonded medical schemes: health student views

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Background: Since their inception, debate has surrounded the utility and fairness of the Bonded Medical Place (BMP) and Medical Rural Bonded Scholarship (MRBS) schemes. These schemes provide a Commonwealth Supported Place to study medicine and/or a scholarship in exchange for a 'return of service' obligation to be completed in a rural or remote area after completing specialist training. A recent independent review recommended the abolition of at least one of these schemes with funding re-directed towards scholarships for students of allied health professions. Much of the debate to date has been anecdotal and based on limited data.

Aims: The aim of this research was to obtain the views of BSP, MRBS, non-bonded medical students and non-medical health students towards the BSP and MRBS schemes.

Specific research questions included:

- Do health students support or oppose bonded schemes as a mechanism to address rural workforce shortages?
- How does the level of support vary between bonded and non-bonded medical students?
- Do non-medical health students support the schemes?
- Do health students support the broadening of the schemes to non-medical health students?

Methods: Health students enrolled at 28 Australian universities were invited via email to participate in an online survey. Participants included BMP, MRBS, non-bonded medical students and non-medical health students.

Results: 920 responses were received, comprising:

- 307 bonded medical students
- 316 non-bonded medical students
- 267 non-medical health students.

65.7% of all respondents were in favour of the schemes as a means of addressing workforce shortages.

17.6% of medical students opposed bonded schemes. There was no significant difference in levels of opposition between bonded and non-bonded medical students 18.3% versus 16.8%; $p=0.665$). Amongst bonded medical students, those studying under the BMP scheme were significantly more likely to be opposed to the schemes than students studying under the MRBS scheme (24.3% versus 3.5%; $p<0.001$). Opposition to the schemes also increased with increasing year of study.

72% of non-medical health students were in favour of similar schemes for non-medical health students, with a further 27.5% being undecided.

Conclusion: There is overall broad support for bonded medical schemes as a means of addressing workforce shortages. Health students express strong support for similar schemes in non-medical health disciplines.