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Abode fears of overseas students threaten exams

By Greg Heakes

HUNDREDS of Hong Kong's overseas students, fearful of losing their right of abode, may miss their final exams by returning to the territory before the handover.

Universities abroad are expecting an exodus, even though the Government has told students not to worry about their residency status.

"A lot of people are coming back and the handover is the main reason," said Peter Au Wan-chung, a student at York University in Toronto.

"People are worried because the Chinese government is so unpredictable."

Mr Au, editor of the Chinese-language student newspaper *Jin Xue*, said there were about 200 Hong Kong students at the university.

At the University of Toronto there are 714 Hong Kong students, making them its largest group of international students.

Mr Au said he believed handover fears would force some Hong Kong students to miss their final exams in June.

The Hong Kong Immigration Department attempted to ease students' fears last week by telling them that they did not have to be in the territory for the handover to qualify for permanent residency.

"Students pursuing their studies overseas are not considered as not settled in Hong Kong," a spokesman said.

"There is no need for them to come back to Hong Kong to apply for a permanent identity card. Nor is it necessary for them to be present on 1 July to retain right of abode."

Brian Davis, senior immigration counsellor at the Commission for Canada, said he was also seeking reassurances on the matter.

"It is important from our perspective that there be information well in advance to allow us to inform Canadians about the options and consequences of those options so they can make the right decisions," Mr Davis said.

"We are asking questions. What are the rules of the game? Ultimately, that is what is going to have to be answered."

The matter is still being discussed by the Sino-British Joint Liaison Group.