

IRU OS-HELP submission

The “Government’s Higher Education Support Amendment (Asian Century) Bill 2013”, amends the Higher Education Support Act (2003) to improve OS-HELP, by expanding eligible activities and the OS-HELP loan amount, to encourage more students to undertake study experiences in Asia.

These amendments support the Government’s AsiaBound annual grants program which is offering 3,500 grants to Australian students to participate in a study experience in Asia.

The IRU welcomes the focus on increasing the number of students undertaking study and related activities in Asia in preference to other parts of the world. We support the amendments, with some clarification sought around the language learning component.

The main changes from the Bill are:

- to expanding eligibility for OS-HELP:
 1. removing the requirement for enrolment with specified overseas providers which will permit a wider range of uses while retaining the connection to the student’s degree,
 2. the OS-HELP loan can be used for a wider range of experiences and purposes, most notably for work experience related to the degree. The IRU is among the universities which have integrated relevant work experiences into the learning for the qualification. Allowing this to be supported by OS-HELP, extends the ways in which students can complete those parts of their qualification,
 3. study can be undertaken closer to the end of their degree, in most cases within a one unit equivalent of completion. This will be of value for students who do not complete their degree through continuous full time study, and
 4. the OS-HELP loan would be available to postgraduate students in commonwealth supported places; and
- Increasing the OS-HELP loan amount from 1 January 2014
 5. eligible students will be able to borrow up to \$7,500 for a six month study period in Asia compared with the \$6,051 limit for study elsewhere;
 6. an extra \$1,000 is available for language intensive courses to support study or work experience in Asia.

Expanding eligibility

The IRU supports measures to broaden student eligibility and therefore access to OS-HELP as one of the mechanisms to encourage Australian students to travel to, and study in, Asia.

Broadening the use of the loan, enabling students to use it closer to the end of their degree and opening it up to postgraduate students will likely encourage more Australian student engagement in Asia. These measures recognize the diversity in today’s curriculum with its range of experiences, including internships, placements and work integrated learning. They also recognise the requirements of part-time and postgraduate students.

Increasing the OS-HELP loan amount (Asia focus) – from 1 January 2014

The OS-HELP loan scheme has been in place for just under a decade providing many students with the financial means to study overseas through access to income contingent loans to cover costs of that study.

The proposal that from 2014 eligible students will be able to borrow up to \$7,500 for a six month study period if taken in Asia provides an additional incentive to consider Asia to the extent that the costs of the study would be more than the \$6,051 otherwise available. Students retain control of how much they borrow, taking account of their private financial capability and the requirement for repayment in due course.

The \$1,000 for language preparation, as part of the study abroad opportunity, is a good initiative that paves the way for students for their in country experience. The wording of the provision specifies that the language training be 'in preparation for undertaking that overseas study' (proposed 118-2). It is important that students have considerable flexibility about how this language study is done to include all sensible options such that the language study could be within Australia or overseas, part of a degree or taken as a free standing short course. It is important to clarify that all these approaches to language acquisition will be eligible.

Recommendation

That the Committee:

- ensure that the requirements concerning language study in preparation for other OS-HELP eligible study permits all sensible options for undertaking that language preparation; and
- with that confirmed, recommend passage of the Bill.