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Trans-Tasman differences in student loans

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Executive summary

- This paper compares student loan and other support arrangements in Australia and New Zealand, with particular reference to the access to these arrangements by citizens of the other country.
- Both countries provide income contingent student loans to tertiary education students. New Zealand offers them to a broader range of students, but has lower repayment income thresholds and higher repayment rates and charges no interest for those who remain in New Zealand, while Australian loans are indexed at the Consumer Price Index rate.
- Increasing levels of outstanding student loan debt are an issue in both countries. Outstanding HELP debt in Australia was estimated at A\$22.3 billion at 30 June 2013, while in New Zealand the outstanding debt amount was NZ\$13.0 billion at 30 June 2012.
- Unlike Australia, New Zealand requires debtors who move overseas to continue loan repayments, however overseas-based borrowers are estimated to be responsible for over 80 per cent of the debt currently in default.
- While both countries are making changes which will bring their arrangements closer, in general New Zealand provides better access to Australian students than Australia does to New Zealanders. This is an ongoing issue for New Zealanders resident in Australia.

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Introduction

New Zealand and Australia have reciprocal visa arrangements enabling citizens of either country to enter and remain in the other country. However when it comes to accessing student loans, arrangements differ considerably. In general, New Zealand is more accommodating than Australia. These differences have recently been the subject of a wider campaign for fairer treatment of New Zealand citizens who are permanently resident in Australia.¹

This paper sets out the differences in access to tertiary student loans and student support for people whose studies and citizenship are on opposite sides of the Tasman. It also describes the New Zealand approach to obtaining loan repayments from debtors who move overseas, which may provide a model for Australia.

A tale of two systems

Visa arrangements

New Zealander citizens who arrive in Australia are issued a Special Category Visa (SCV) that was introduced in 1994.² Those who arrived in Australia after 26 February 2001 are ‘unprotected’ SCV holders, while those who arrived before this date are ‘protected’. This divide imposes different standards of access to a range of social security entitlements as well as eligibility for permanent residency and Australian citizenship.³

Australians who arrive in New Zealand are exempt from needing a permit and can live and work there indefinitely.⁴

Higher education systems

There are 39 universities in Australia and just eight in New Zealand. In 2011, Australian universities taught 888,431 equivalent full-time students⁵ while New Zealand universities taught 136,573.⁶

1. [OzKiwi website](#), accessed 13 November 2013.

2. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [‘Fact sheet 17 – New Zealanders in Australia’](#), DIBP website, 2013, accessed 13 November 2013.

3. Australian Government, *Guide to Social Security Law*, [‘9.1.2.40 New Zealand citizens’](#), 11 November 2013, accessed 13 November 2013.

4. New Zealand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [‘Visas’](#), New Zealand High Commission Canberra website, 2013, accessed 13 November 2013.

5. Department of Industry, [2011 full year student summary](#), Selected Higher Education Statistics Publication, Department of Industry website, accessed 13 November 2013.

New Zealand citizens studying in Australia and Australians studying in New Zealand are generally treated as domestic students. In 2012, out of all domestic students studying at higher education providers in Australia, 886,815 (95 per cent) were Australian citizens, 10,745 (1 per cent) were New Zealand citizens and 36,550 (4 per cent) were other domestic students (permanent residents and holders of humanitarian visas).⁷ Out of all domestic students enrolled in formal tertiary qualifications in 2012 in New Zealand, 320,285 (85 per cent) were New Zealand citizens, 4,070 (1 per cent) were Australian citizens and 50,430 (13 per cent) were other domestic students (holders of permanent residency and humanitarian visas).⁸

Fees for domestic students in New Zealand vary by course and by institution. In Australia, student contributions vary up to a maximum level for different discipline groups. Therefore, comparisons are difficult, but the table below provides some examples.

Comparison of course fees for domestic students for selected courses, Australia and New Zealand, 2013

Course (undergraduate)	Australia (maximum, based on equivalent full-time student load) ^(a)	New Zealand (indicative only) ^(b)
Arts	Band 1: Up to A\$5,868	NZ\$4,998 (Otago) to \$5,177 (Auckland)
Computing	Band 2: Up to A\$8,363	NZ\$5,755 (Canterbury) to \$5,972 (Waikato)
Medicine	Band 3: Up to A\$9,792	NZ\$13,277 (Otago)
Law	Band 3: Up to A\$9,792	NZ\$5,576 (Auckland)

Sources:

(a) Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIICCSRTE), [Thinking about uni? Commonwealth supported places and HECS-HELP for 2013](#)

(b) Universities New Zealand, [Fees for domestic students 2013](#)

Student loan schemes

In Australia, income contingent student loans were introduced in 1989, and by 2010, 2.5 million students had taken out loans.⁹ The Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) provides access to funding for tuition costs, which is then repaid through the tax system once a threshold income is reached. While there are a number of different schemes under the HELP program, including assistance to some vocational education and training students, full-fee paying students and those studying overseas, the majority of loans are provided to higher education students in Commonwealth supported places (HECS-HELP loans). For example, more than 87 per cent of loans taken out in 2010 were HECS-HELP loans.¹⁰

Living cost assistance is available in the form of means-tested income support and other payments for students but these do not constitute student loans. The 2013-14 Budget announced that one of these support payments—Student Start-up Scholarships—is to be brought within the HELP scheme from 1 January 2014 but this had not been legislated at the time of writing.¹¹

New Zealand's Student Loan Scheme (SLS) commenced in 1992 and 1.1 million students had taken out loans by the end of 2011.¹² It provides access to funding for course fees, course-related costs and living costs. As with the Australian system, the loans are repaid through the tax system once a threshold income level is reached. The SLS is available to students at all levels of tertiary education. In 2011, 54 per cent of borrowers were at universities, with the remainder attending polytechnics, private training establishments and Maori colleges.¹³

6. Universities New Zealand, ['The New Zealand university system'](#), Universities New Zealand website, accessed 13 November 2013.

7. Department of Industry, [2012 full year student summary](#), Selected Higher Education Statistics Publication, Department of Industry website, accessed 13 November 2013.

8. This includes students enrolled in polytechnics and other training establishments as well as those at universities. Data provided by New Zealand Ministry of Education following request from the author.

9. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), [Higher education report 2010](#), p. 38, accessed 6 November 2013.

10. Ibid, pp. 40–44.

11. Australian Government, ['Part 2: expense measures'](#), *Budget measures: budget paper no. 2: 2013–14*, p. 220, accessed 13 November 2013.

12. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, [Student Loan Scheme annual report](#), Ministry of Education, October 2012, p. 1, accessed 5 November 2013.

13. Ibid, p. 26.

In 2010, more than 80 per cent of higher education students in Australia required to pay a student contribution took out a HECS-HELP loan to pay at least part of this contribution.¹⁴ The average student debt at 30 June 2010 was A\$13,600.¹⁵

In the 2011 academic year, 74 per cent of students eligible to borrow from the New Zealand scheme did so, while the average loan balance as at 30 June 2012 was NZ\$18,494.¹⁶

The latest estimate of the average number of years to repay debt for Australian students is 8.4 years.¹⁷ Average repayment times are not available for New Zealand students, however the forecast median repayment time (for students who completed their New Zealand-based studies in 2008) is 6.7 years.¹⁸ Unlike Australia, students who go overseas are required to make some repayments, but there is a significant difference between median repayment times for students who remain in New Zealand (5.5 years) compared with those who spend some time overseas (11.8 years).¹⁹

Australian loan balances are indexed at the rate of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) with no administration charge, while New Zealand loans are interest free for those resident in New Zealand, but there is an establishment charge of NZ\$60, and an annual charge of NZ\$40 is applied to balances over NZ\$20.²⁰

Another factor influencing repayment time is the rate of repayment. New Zealand students pay 12 cents in the dollar by way of loan repayment, once their income reaches the repayment threshold (in 2012 NZ\$19,084).²¹ Australian students pay 4 cents in the dollar once their income reaches the repayment threshold (in 2013, A\$51,309), rising to 8 cents in the dollar for those earning A\$95,288 or more.²²

In both Australia and New Zealand, the loan balances of deceased borrowers are written off.

The value of the outstanding HELP debt was estimated at A\$22.3 billion at 30 June 2013, and is projected to grow to A\$42.1 billion by June 2017.²³ As at 30 June 2012, the nominal value of the SLS loan balance was NZ\$13.0 billion.²⁴

New Zealand students in Australia

Access to student loans

Currently, New Zealand citizens are not eligible for HELP loans and must pay their entire student contribution for each semester upfront and do not receive the 10 per cent discount for up-front payment that other domestic students receive.²⁵

Until 1996, student loans (then called HECS loans) were available to New Zealand citizens studying in Australia who were permanent residents. Introduction of the *Higher Education Funding Amendment Act (No. 2) 1995* restricted access to HECS loans to those New Zealanders who had been permanent residents before 1 January 1996 and who had commenced their courses before this date. Others were required to pay their HECS contributions upfront.

Similar eligibility requirements were included when HELP was introduced from 1 January 2005 under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (HESA).²⁶ Section 90-1 of HESA provides that in order to receive HECS-HELP assistance a student must meet citizenship or residency requirements. The requirements (section 90-5) are that

14. DEEWR, op. cit., p. 40.

15. Ibid, p. 38.

16. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, op. cit., p. 23 and p. 31.

17. Australian Government, [Portfolio budget statements 2013-14: budget related paper no. 1.12: Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education Portfolio](#), p. 93., accessed 13 November 2013.

18. The average is the sum of all repayment times divided by the number of repayments, whereas the median is the point at which 50% of students had repaid their loans. The median is likely to be somewhat lower than the average.

19. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, op. cit., p. 38.

20. New Zealand, Inland Revenue, [‘Student loans: interest and other charges’](#), Inland Revenue website, accessed 7 November 2013.

21. New Zealand, Inland Revenue, [‘Student loans information’](#), Inland Revenue website, accessed 13 November 2013.

22. Australian Government, [‘Loan repayment’](#), Study Assist website, accessed 13 November 2013.

23. Australian Government, *Budget strategy and outlook: budget paper no. 1: 2013–14*, p. 7–13.

24. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, op. cit., p. 44.

25. Australian Government, [‘HECS-HELP’](#), Study Assist website, accessed 13 November 2013.

26. [Higher Education Support Act 2003](#) (Cth), accessed 13 November 2013.

the student is an Australian citizen or a permanent humanitarian visa holder who will be resident in Australia for the duration of the unit. The same rule applies to the other types of HELP loans.

Access to other forms of assistance

Commonwealth supported places

While they cannot access HELP, New Zealand citizens are considered domestic students for the purposes of taking up a Commonwealth supported place (CSP). This has significant benefits as CSPs are government subsidised and considerably cheaper than places offered to full-fee paying overseas students.

Section 36-10 (2) of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* states that a New Zealand citizen meets the citizenship or residency requirements for a CSP if he or she will be resident within Australia for the duration of the unit.²⁷

Research degree scholarships

New Zealand citizens are also considered domestic students for the purposes of higher degrees by research. This means that they can take up places in the Research Training Scheme and receive an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) to help with living expenses while they study. APA scholarships are for students who undertake a higher degree by research (that is, a research masters or a doctorate) at an eligible Australian higher education provider. In 2013 the scholarship is worth A\$24,653 per annum for a full time student.

Student support

New Zealand students may be eligible for other forms of student support such as Youth Allowance provided they hold a protected SCV. If they do not hold a protected SCV, they will need to meet residency requirements for Youth Allowance (in general, this means two years residency for newly arrived people). The waiting period may be waived for long term residents (ten years or more):

If you are not an Australian resident, but arrived in Australia on a New Zealand passport after 26 February 2001 and have lived here continuously for at least 10 years since 26 February 2001, you may qualify for payment of Youth Allowance for up to six months. If you qualify for payment under this exemption, you will not need to serve the two-year newly arrived resident's waiting period.²⁸

From 1 January 2014 (subject to the passage of legislation that has not yet been introduced) new Student Start-up Scholarships will be student loans under the HELP.²⁹ This raises an issue for New Zealand citizens who may currently qualify for this form of assistance but who, under current rules, are unable to take out HELP loans.

Australian students in New Zealand

Access to student loans

Like New Zealand citizens in Australia, Australian citizens in New Zealand are classified as domestic students and do not require student visas.³⁰

In recent years the New Zealand Government has tightened up on eligibility requirements. Currently, Australian citizens become eligible to apply for tertiary student allowances and student loans after a residency period of two years. The two year waiting period was introduced in 2011 and is referred to as a 'two year stand down'. In the 2013 Budget the New Zealand Government announced an increase in the stand down period:

The Government is extending the current student loan and student allowances stand-down period for permanent residents and Australian citizens from 2 years to 3 years for applications for study starting on or after 1 January 2014.³¹

27. Ibid.

28. Department of Human Services (DHS), '[Residence requirements for Youth Allowance](#)', DHS website, accessed 13 November 2013.

29. Australian Government, '[Part 2: Expense Measures](#)', op. cit., p. 216, accessed June 2013.

30. New Zealand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, '[Education for Australians in New Zealand](#)', New Zealand High Commission Canberra website, accessed 13 November 2013.

31. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, '[Student Support: changes by initiative – Budget 2013](#)', Ministry of Education website, accessed 13 November 2013/July 2013.

A New Zealand student loan can cover three things—compulsory course fees, course-related costs and living costs:

- the compulsory course fees loan is similar to the student contribution amount (HECS-HELP) levied by Australian universities.³²
- The course-related costs loan is designed to assist with buying items like text books and computer equipment. Up to NZ\$1,000 per year can be borrowed.³³ This is similar to the Student Start-up Scholarship offered to eligible students in Australia.
- The living costs loan is designed to cover any of the ordinary living expenses of a student. Up to NZ\$173.56 per week can be borrowed. If a student borrows for living costs, any amount they would receive under Student Allowance is subtracted from the payment.³⁴

In general, borrowers are not charged interest on student loans provided they continue to reside in New Zealand, but overseas-based borrowers are charged interest. Borrowers who head overseas for six months or more can apply for a one-year ‘repayment holiday’ but the loan will continue to accrue interest charges during that time.³⁵

Access to other forms of assistance

Student allowances

In New Zealand, Australian citizens can also access Student Allowance after two years permanent residency.³⁶ This is a weekly payment to help with living expenses during full-time study. It is not a student loan but a benefit, similar to Youth Allowance in Australia.³⁷ In each case the amount received depends on the student’s individual circumstances.

Student loan repayment—important differences

There are important differences between Australia and New Zealand concerning student loan repayment.

Repayment thresholds

In both Australia and New Zealand, student loans are income contingent loans that are managed through the taxation system. Repayments are triggered once the debtor’s taxable income reaches a threshold level but the levels are quite different:

- In Australia the repayment threshold is A\$51,309 (for the 2013–14 financial year).³⁸ The repayment rate starts at 4 cents in every dollar earned over the repayment threshold and rises along with income. A borrower with a taxable income of A\$100,000 or more will pay 8 cents in the dollar.
- In New Zealand the repayment threshold is just NZ\$19,084 (for the 2012–13 financial year).³⁹ The repayment rate is 12 cents in every dollar earned over the repayment threshold.

This means that in New Zealand, students commence repaying their loans much earlier and at a faster rate than in Australia.

Fees, interest and indexation

Loan fees and interest rates are set out in the New Zealand student loan contract.

New Zealand student loans incur an establishment fee of NZ\$60 and an annual administration fee thereafter of NZ\$40. As noted above, New Zealand residents are exempt from interest payments but overseas-based borrowers are not and interest is added to the loan balance. Clause 7 of the student loan contract states:

32. New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, ‘[Compulsory fees](#)’, Studylink website, accessed 13 November 2013.

33. New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, ‘[Course-related costs](#)’, Studylink website, accessed 13 November 2013.

34. New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, ‘[Living costs](#)’, Studylink website, accessed 13 November 2013.

35. New Zealand, Inland Revenue, ‘[Student loans: I’m going overseas for 6 months or more](#)’, Inland Revenue website, accessed 13 November 2013.

36. New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, ‘[Student allowance](#)’, Studylink website, accessed 13 November 2013.

37. DHS, ‘[Youth Allowance: eligibility basics](#)’, DHS website, accessed 13 November 2013.

38. Australian Government, ‘[Loan repayment](#)’, Study Assist website, accessed 13 November 2013.

39. New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, ‘[Paying back your loan](#)’, Study Link website, accessed 13 November 2013.

7.1 If you are a *New Zealand based borrower*, you have an interest free loan unless you have incurred *late payment interest*.

7.2 *Overseas based borrowers* are charged interest.⁴⁰

The interest rate applying to overseas-based borrowers is currently 5.9 per cent. Late payment interest is charged at 0.789 per cent per month.

In Australia there are no student loan fees for HECS-HELP but all HELP loans are subject to indexation based on the Consumer Price Index rate. In 2013 the rate is 2.0 per cent and the revised loan amount is adjusted annually.⁴¹

Treatment of overseas-based borrowers

New Zealand has an overseas-based borrower repayment system, whereas Australia currently does not require any loan repayments from debtors who are out of the country.

As at 30 June 2012, New Zealand's student loan debt stood at NZ\$13.0 billion.⁴² Overseas-based borrowers are responsible for NZ\$2.7 billion, or over 20 per cent, of that outstanding loan balance.⁴³

Overseas-based borrowers who owe money to the New Zealand Government are obliged to make two repayments per year. Since they are not part of the New Zealand taxation system, the amount payable is not income contingent and is instead based on the size of the loan balance. For example, a loan balance of between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$15,000 requires a minimum annual repayment of NZ\$1,000, payable in two equal instalments (generally at the end of September and end of March), while a balance of over NZ\$30,000 requires an annual repayment of NZ\$3,000.⁴⁴

New Zealand estimates that overseas-based borrowers are responsible for 82 per cent of the NZ\$520 million of student debt currently in default.⁴⁵ In response, in its 2012 Budget the New Zealand Government introduced an Overseas Based Borrowers Compliance Initiative designed to recover more of the student loan debt held by borrowers who have left the country. This initiative relies on cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Inland Revenue, Internal Affairs and New Zealand customs and immigration and includes a suite of measures:

- educating overseas-based borrowers about their obligations
- expanded payment options and fee-free global money transfers
- tracking and tracing non-compliant overseas based borrowers and
- taking legal and debt collection action against defaulters including by identifying borrowers when they enter New Zealand or issuing an arrest warrant for borrowers who are about to leave.

As at March 2013, this initiative had collected repayments of NZ\$59.1 million from overseas-based borrowers.⁴⁶

Under Australia's current system, student loans are not repayable while the borrower is overseas. Although the Australian Government does not publish detailed data like the New Zealand Government, researchers have estimated the value of HELP debt owed by overseas-based borrowers:

A conservative estimate of the amount of foregone HECS revenue for the 1989 to 2011 graduate cohorts working overseas is over \$400 million, but it is shown that under other plausible assumptions the foregone revenue may be close to double this amount.⁴⁷

40. New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, [Student loan contract](#), Study Link website, accessed 13 November 2013.

41. Australian Taxation Office (ATO), ['HELP indexation rates'](#), ATO website, accessed 13 November 2013.

42. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, [Student Loan Scheme Annual Report](#), op. cit., p.44.

43. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, ['Statistics'](#), Education counts website, Summary of Student Loans data Table SLS32, accessed 13 November 2013.

44. New Zealand, Inland Revenue, [Student loans: Repayment obligations for overseas-based borrowers](#), website, accessed 13 November 2013.

45. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, [Student support: overseas-based borrowers – Budget 2013](#), accessed 13 November 2013.

46. Ibid.

47. B Chapman and T Higgins, [The costs of unpaid HECS debts from graduates going overseas](#), Crawford School Working Paper No. 13-03, 17 January 2013, accessed 13 November 2013.

Treatment of overseas-based borrowers is something the Australian Government may need to consider in order to reduce increasing levels of student debt—total outstanding HELP debt was revised up by A\$2.1 billion to A\$22.3 billion in the 2013–14 Budget.⁴⁸

Both countries introducing changes

Both New Zealand and Australia have announced changes to the rules governing Trans-Tasman student loans. New Zealand is tightening access while Australia is easing requirements. These changes will bring the two countries policy positions closer together—but student loan arrangements will still be far from reciprocal.

New Zealand

New Zealand plans to strengthen its residency requirements again. From 1 January 2014, the stand down period for Australian citizens will be extended from two to three years meaning students will have to reside in New Zealand for three years before they can get a student loan.⁴⁹

From 1 April 2014, New Zealand will introduce a changed repayment regime for overseas student loans (which will apply to all students who move overseas, not just Australians).⁵⁰ Repayments will now be determined by the initial size of the debt, not the debt balance. There will be no change for those with a debt of less than NZ\$15,000, but for those with higher levels of debt this means higher annual repayment levels (up to NZ\$5,000 for those with debt greater than NZ\$60,000) and these repayment amounts will no longer reduce as the loan balance reduces. The result is expected to mean faster repayment for overseas-based borrowers with large loan debts.

Accompanying the fixed repayment regime for overseas borrowers are new powers to arrest non-compliant borrowers who are about to leave the country. This power will be limited to the ‘most non-compliant’ based on the size of the loan, age of the loan and behaviours of the borrower.⁵¹

Australia

The Australian Government has also announced changes to eligibility requirements affecting New Zealand citizens in Australia (subject to the passage of legislation that has not yet been introduced). This may be partly in response to a steady campaign about the unequal treatment of New Zealanders in Australia.⁵² In addition, a report prepared jointly by the Productivity Commissions of Australia and New Zealand, delivered in December 2012 recommended:

The Australian Government should seek to improve access of New Zealand citizens to tertiary education and vocational training through the provision of student loans, subject to a waiting period and appropriate debt recovery provisions.⁵³

It is now proposed that, from 1 January 2015, New Zealand citizens who hold a Special Category Visa will be able to access HELP provided they first entered Australia as a dependent minor aged under 18 years-of-age and have been ordinarily resident in Australia for the previous ten years.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Even if the proposed changes are implemented, Australia will still ask more of New Zealanders than vice versa. Most notably, Australia will require ten years residency (rather than the three required of Australian citizens in New Zealand) before people from across the Tasman are eligible for student loans.

While these inequities continue to exist there will be pressure on Australian governments from New Zealanders living in Australia to improve access arrangements further.

48. L Doyle, ‘[Higher education](#)’, *Budget Review 2013-14*, Parliamentary Library, Canberra 2013, accessed 13 November 2013.

49. New Zealand, Ministry of Education, [Student Support: changes by initiative – Budget 2013](#), Ministry of Education website, accessed 13 November 2013.


50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. For examples see [OzKiwi website](#), accessed 13 November 2013; R Burton-Bradley, ‘[New Zealanders, Australia’s ‘underclass’](#)’, [newmatilda.com](#), 14 March 2013, accessed 13 November 2013; and NZ citizens living in Australia, ‘[A fair go for NZ citizens living in Australia](#)’, [care2 petitions website](#), accessed 13 November 2013.

53. Australian Productivity Commission and New Zealand Productivity Commission, [Strengthening trans-Tasman economic relations](#), Joint Study, Final Report, November 2012, Recommendation R4.25, p. 17, accessed 12 November 2013.

54. Australian Government, ‘[FAQs NZ](#)’, Study Assist website, accessed 13 November 2013.



Australia may also look to New Zealand's example in attempting to recoup student loan debt owing to debtors who leave the country before repaying their debt.