

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## Senate urged to support student income support package

Legislation enabling equitable access and participation in university education through better targeted student income support must be supported unamended by the Senate according to a key group of universities.

Chair of Innovative Research Universities (IRU) Professor Sandra Harding said the legislation – the *Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009* - before the Senate is vitally important to ensuring that a university education is open to all Australians, including those who are financially disadvantaged or live in rural and regional areas.

“All seven IRU universities particularly commend the introduction of student start-up scholarships for all students in receipt of Youth Allowance or Austudy,” Professor Harding, Vice Chancellor of James Cook University said.

The IRU universities are Charles Darwin, Flinders, Griffith, La Trobe, Murdoch, Newcastle and James Cook.

The scholarships, valued at \$2,254 in 2010 and to be indexed annually, will alleviate the financial pressures experienced by many new students in meeting the costs of textbooks, equipment and other lump-sum expenses.

Professor Harding said that students needing to relocate to study will receive a relocation scholarship to assist with costs, valued at \$1,000 per year and \$4,000 for the student's initial relocation

“The scholarships are critically important to redressing the decline in higher education participation rates for rural and regional students,” she said.

“IRU applauds the government's plan to exempt merit and equity scholarships from the social security income test. The exemption will be a huge relief to many low-SES students who have gratefully accepted a scholarship only to find that it erodes their eligibility for government income support.

“It will also encourage universities and private benefactors to fund more scholarships for financially disadvantaged students.”

Professor Harding said that the package of measures will also extend eligibility for income support to the broader student population.

“Through the increase in the parental income test threshold many more students will automatically access Youth Allowance, enabling them to get on with their university study rather than focusing on meeting the criteria for support as an independent.

“At the same time, the lowering of the age of independence from 25 to 22 years will mean that more young people will be automatically eligible for income support and many will receive a higher rate of payment,” Professor Harding said.

“We need more Australians to complete a higher education qualification if we are to meet the nation’s future skill needs.

“This will require a new generation of Australians, many from financially disadvantaged communities, to enter university and successfully complete their studies.

“The student income support legislation before the Senate will be vital in ensuring that more students, including those most in need, receive financial assistance,” said Professor Harding.

The seven IRU universities account for 20% of all low-SES university student enrolments and 18% of all regional and remote student enrolments in Australia. They deliver higher education to students in more than 35 locations nationally, including city, outer metropolitan, regional and remote campuses and centres.

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