



You're gold...if you're 15 years old

A TAFE Perspective

A supplementary report
On the perceived impact of WorkChoices on
Youth Employment and Education in NSW

Produced for



September 2007

Contents

Methodological Note	3
1.0 TAFE students report that the stakes at both school and work are higher now than they were when they were in high school. More work on top of more school equals more pressure and academic performance can suffer.	4
2.0 Financial pressures are much greater for young adults than for teenagers. With one foot in the parental home and one in the adult world, TAFE students find life to be more expensive than ever before and saving more challenging. At the same time, TAFE students have competing priorities for their earnings.	7
3.0 TAFE students share the views of younger students participating in this study: WorkChoices has given employers more opportunities to further exploit young, casual, student workers.	10
4.0 A bad ‘first job’ experience can leave students wary about the workplace for years. ‘Clocking off’ is an oft-mentioned practice of fast food supervisors under pressure to meet tight budgets that means some unfortunate students ‘work for free.’	14
5.0 TAFE students say good employers make education a priority and try to create flexible workplaces. The best employers communicate regularly, formally and informally. However, students of any age are still reluctant to say no to bosses or to colleagues.	16

Methodological Note

This report was commissioned to investigate the extent to which TAFE students shared the views expressed in an earlier report, “You’re Gold... if you’re fifteen years old” on the perceived impact of WorkChoices on youth employment and education in NSW. It is based on two discussion groups with students 18-19. Given the small sample size, the findings of this report should only be considered together with the findings of the main report. However, given the similarity of views and attitudes expressed, it is felt that these results would be indicative of broader opinion had a larger sample been canvassed.

As was the case with the participants in the six previous discussion groups and the participants in the state-wide Internet survey, each student was employed a minimum of three hours per week throughout the school year and was not hired or supervised by a family member. One group was composed of young women and one of young men in order to encourage honesty and lively debate and discussion. The fieldwork for this report was conducted in suburban Sydney in September 2007.

The groups used for the research were **AFFINITY GROUPS** – naturally occurring groups of friends, classmates and co-workers. The use of existing social groups allowed the project to harness the dynamics of spontaneous peer-group interaction (including the important phenomenon of opinion leadership) and to ‘borrow’ the trust, honesty and frankness of established relationships. This is particularly important as it is known to encourage spontaneous discussion among younger participants.

Discussions were held in the **NATURAL HABITAT**, of the participants, at either home or school. The locations were chosen to maximise the comfort of the group and to minimise the artificiality of the research process.

A **NON-DIRECTIVE** technique was used to moderate the discussions. However, a general discussion guide was developed in consultation with the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation as a general framework. The same guide was used for the group discussions underlying this report as the main report in order to gain a sense of shared attitudes and beliefs. Where possible, the asking of direct questions was avoided and participants were encouraged to engage in spontaneous discussion of the topic with one another.

Data generated by non-directive group discussion is essentially qualitative and anecdotal. Accordingly, no attempt has been made to quantify the findings of the qualitative research or to draw distinctions between majority and minority opinions. The report offers a summary of views expressed, though some emphasis is given to those opinions and attitudes which appeared to be consistent across the whole sample.

Randall Pearce, BA, MPA
Director
Think: Insight & Advice Pty Ltd

1. TAFE students report that the stakes at both school and work are higher now than they were when they were in high school. More work on top of more school equals more pressure and academic performance can suffer.

1.1 'We're older now' but not necessarily wiser. Despite facing increasing time pressures, few report having mastered time management. As a result, TAFE students are still vulnerable to long hours and late shifts at work.

I'm just really getting older now, and I find there are more things that I want to do like travel and stuff but I just don't have enough time for work and everything else. I would like to go overseas but I just don't know how I can do it.

Student 1: I usually start [my assignment] at about 11 o'clock that night 'cause I underestimate how much time it will take.

Student 2: Or, be like me and get home from work and start at 11 o'clock at night.

We have an assignment that is due tomorrow and most of us haven't started it yet. It's supposed to be 15 pages. A third of the class haven't started it yet.

If you have to skip class tomorrow to finish it, go for it. Although you do get marked down if you skip class.

If I've got to do something I've got to set up time for it and write it down. If I have anything out of my usual routine I usually forget about it. Yesterday I forgot I had to work 8 till 5. I completely forgot, so they called me up at 9 o'clock. I was like, "Oh, I forgot, sorry." I had to come in but they just laughed at me.

Suppose if it comes down to it I'm all right at organising things but I won't exactly leaving a lot of time to do what I want. I'm always very much the last minute sort of thing. My assessment's probably the last minute as well. Forget it for three weeks then I'll be doing it in the last minute for sure. I always tell myself I will do it now and I space it out but it never happens. I'm always saying it's such a wasted chance [TAFE].

1.2 TAFE students say they need to take their studies 'seriously,' either to bed down necessary career-building skills or to preserve options for further study. Some report 'feeling stressed'; some to a debilitating extent.

It's probably what we are going to do in the future. So, I guess you try as much as you can.

It's not like we're not just studying something that we're never going to use again like at school. We're studying something that we're going to use. It's vital that we do understand what we're taught because we will have more responsibility in future when we're using that knowledge.

Because we've put a priority of this course, we've got to make sure that we get everything done to the best of our abilities, as well as the rest of whatever else we've got to do like work and sporting commitments.

To get into uni we have to get high marks. You want to have good marks for everything just to see.

1.3 In comparison to high school, students at TAFE say falling behind can happen faster and come with more serious consequences.

Juggling but struggling at the same time. It's like setting yourself up for this disaster.

At school it seemed like we could go out Thursday, Friday, Saturday and go to sleep at all hours till the next morning. You didn't have to worry about anything. Now, you've got to think of what you've got to do the next day. We can't even afford to be sick now; we can't afford to have heaps of time wasted. It's too much.

I was away sick last week and I got to class this morning and everyone was just talking about the subject we were on today and I didn't have a clue because I didn't know what was going on. So, that's just a whole week I have to catch up on, as well as doing my assessments.

I'm stressing a lot. You know you have to do it. So it puts a lot of pressure.

I think more than anything I just get embarrassed, because I sort of think I get really self-conscious like "Oh, other people must think I am an idiot" and think "I am stupid. It was probably easy for them." Like straight away it is just shot to the self-confidence.

I got so stressed that I just broke down and I couldn't hand the assessment in on the due date. I had to hand it in the day after because I just kept crying the whole day. I was so over exhausted and just could not do it. You don't get any help at all, like at school. Just juggling everything else I had on as well was hard.

1.4 TAFE student workers find themselves pinched between young teenage workers and full-time adult employees, making it difficult to say no to additional shifts. More work on top of more school, equals more pressure, according to some.

Yes, I work with a lot of older girls that are studying as well and a lot of the shifts get chucked on me because they are like, "Why can't you do it?" So yes, a lot of the older girls that I work with are very demanding, and even though it's your day off and you've said that you can't work, they'll still say you have to because nobody else can. So, you have to do it. So you sort of get pushed into it.

There's nobody else to do it so I have to go to TAFE from nine o'clock in the morning until five o'clock at night and then go and work from six until nine and then try to do assignments.

You know because they're offering you the shift and like you get worried that if like you say no they won't offer it to you again....something like that.

And so I sort of get stuck and the other three girls decide that they don't – that they have something on...because I'm not there during the week when some of them are.

2. Financial pressures are much greater for young adults than for teenagers. With one foot in the parental home and one in the adult world, TAFE students find life to be more expensive than ever before and saving more challenging. At the same time, TAFE students have competing priorities for their earnings.

2.1 There is a point, in either age or earnings where TAFE students feel they are truly on their own financially. Independence, represented by cars and petrol costs, comes at a price. Illness can make a significant dent in a casual worker's budget.

When you have a real job.

When you start to make \$200 week, you really start to depend on yourself.

I guess it comes with age as well.

If you are going to get a job, you need a car or a travel allowance. You need a job to finance that.

I find that just buying food like, out of home, because I don't always get food from home because we're at TAFE four days a week and then I'm at work for the rest, so it is like I buy my lunch and sometimes dinner most of the days of the week which is pretty bad. You do not realise how much you actually spend, just on food.

Not to mention in the last few years we would have all gotten our licenses and now we've all got to worry about petrol and cars and services and...that's just another sort of responsibility that we have.

Student 1: Yes well say you're sick. But you were sick for a week and you probably didn't work or anything; that's like the money you might need for petrol or for something else.

Student 2: I hadn't worked for six weeks because of my injury and I'm definitely feeling it. Definitely.

2.2 TAFE students express reluctance to rely on their parents for financial support; they are old enough to recognise the money pressures their parents are under and admit to feelings of guilt if they have to fall back on Mum and Dad.

Because we're older I think, parents aren't always going to be responsible for financial support. So that means that we have to obviously earn money ourselves and work.

I spend my money. My parents have to worry about bills and mortgage and stuff.

I would spend more of my money than my parents. I'd feel guilty.

I still grab it off 'em but I feel guilty.

I can't take money off my Mum. She just has a lot of hand-me-downs and that. She buys so much stuff for us and then she just whinges about not having money.

I am definitely not a very good saver at the moment, but I don't like to borrow stuff off of my parents, I do feel bad about it.

Now that me and my sisters are older, we understand what financial position they are in and we can appreciate it. They just cannot afford to buy us stuff. They cannot afford to buy little extras on the side whereas when we younger we used to just take that stuff for granted.

2.3 'Having a life' means having a social life. Nightclubs and drinking take the place of fast food and technology in older students' budgets; a night in the city can be an expensive undertaking.

Student 1: Go to the city and empty your savings account.

Student 2: Oh yeah, spend a couple of hundred.

My girlfriend. Everytime we go out, we spend money, on food or something.

You try to make it go as far as possible. It depends on whether you are drunk or not. Then, you might just as well hand over your wallet.

We try to allocate it...certain amount of petrol and food, and then the rest goes to going out. I always seem to go out though.

Any opportunity you've got to see people always ends up costing money; if it's not revolving around food it's going somewhere with a cover charge.

If you're out on the town, you want to look your best if you are a TAFE student.

New outfits, new outfit every time you go out.

I do not really need it, but it looks good.

Nobody wants to be left out.

You can save some money but you can't save it all because you can't go out or do anything.

You do not want to be alone at home by yourself. So, even though you know you should not spend the money, you go anyway because you don't want to be the one at home to miss out.

2.4 Saving is difficult. Some report doing better than others; they say it is a matter of priorities. Those who aren't spending up at present say they have specific saving goals.

Depends on what your priorities are. Some people are more like party people. Others look ahead to what they want to do.

I'm not a big spender. I leave it in my account and I don't take it out.

Save some of it. The rest on clothes, transport. Once in a while, presents.

I was very good at saving when I was younger, before I started driving and things I was very stingy with my money, and I saved a lot. But then I started going nightclubbing and driving and all those different things.

Some say that specific, short-term goals are more motivating than long-term goals for saving.

I am really not saving for something specific, you do not have any real incentive to save, so you could think oh I've got to save to buy a car, I have got to save for my house in the future, but you do not have any set dates on there and you haven't seen it so you really do not have the motivation.

I am going to Cambodia in two weeks and I've been saving like crazy. I think, I've actually been really strict on myself for the first time ever. So it's been really good.

3. TAFE students share the views of younger students participating in this study: WorkChoices has given employers more opportunities to further exploit young, casual, student workers.

3.1 TAFE students believe it is difficult to compete with younger workers because they are more expensive and more demanding.

They're cheaper. Cause they're younger.

On a public holiday all the young ones work. 'Cause they're cheaper; it's all fourteen year olds.

Moderator: Rules?

Student: There probably are but most people don't know about them. That's how they are able to take advantage of them.

Yes. [Fifteen year olds] will take whatever work they can get. They do not complain or anything whereas people like me to go up to her and say, "I need this, I need that" and make her do it. The others would just keep their mouth shut and pretty much do what they're told.

3.2 AWAs are offered with the promise of higher rates for all hours worked but TAFE students in some workplaces report being paid the same as full-time employees working regular hours. TAFE students believe the policy unfairly targets student workers. This view was held equally passionately by those who currently receive penalty rates as those who do not.

Most of the people that wouldn't get penalty rates on the weekends that work the weekends would be students, like younger people. But the thing is that they are all at school during the week so that's really their only opportunity to work. So it is unfair in that way.

I think you are talking about Sunday, I think Sunday's usually is seen a family day, so we kind of need that...

There was a period where some people got penalty rates but then they changed it. Some people have been getting fucked off.

They say that it's our wage is higher because we don't get that but it's just the quota rate.

Well they just said there's no penalty rates, we work as normal I suppose, on like a Sunday or a Public holiday, it's just the same rate as you normally get.

It's crap for me. They say it's unfair to give people that work during the week just the normal pay if they work on Sunday and that because I always work Sunday nights it's unfair to give me a higher pay. I think that's crap because most companies give penalty rates, so I think mine shouldn't really be an exception to that.

If I got told there are no penalty rates on a Sunday I would find that kind of annoying because I only do four hours a week. So, instead of having what I'm earning, I'd probably have \$10 less or something. As much as it doesn't sound a lot, in the same way it adds up every week, you know. It's how much you get.

3.2 As noted in our earlier report, WorkChoices has contributed additional confusion over rates of pay. Some students report that pay rates are often well-kept secrets in some workplaces. Students of any age are reluctant to ask about pay or pay rises.

I did not know how much I was going to get because we get different wages, depending on our age. It goes up as you get older but like the managers there, are not allowed to disclose to each other how much they get because everyone gets different.

It's sort of like, you don't even talk about it, and it's a big secret. The management don't tell you about it until you start asking questions and then they just sort of brush it off. They just give everyone a big lecture so the company won't have to pay more, just in case people start asking a lot of questions. It's stupid, I hate it.

That is one question I am always hesitant to ask. I hate asking that.

I find it a bit hard to judge the question, like how to word it. Like say can you tell me how much do I get an hour?

3.3 Some employers administer AWAs like enterprise agreements...but there is no negotiation either individually or collectively, according to some of the students participating in this study.

I remember all of us were there, all the younger people that were working, there was a lot of young people, and we all were like in a meeting and we went through like an agreement and we all signed it.

I had to sign; because they were like, "Oh yes, you've got to fill it in." So, I just signed it.

I did not even know what is was

3.4 A raise is out of the question; the only solution is to work more hours. Extra hours lead to fatigue and, sometimes, minor accidents.

I would think about doing more shifts before asking for a raise. That is just what I would think of first.

[Overworked fifteen year olds] are burnt out. They get really sort of agro.

Probably about fifteen, sixteen hours is about the limit. I don't play sport or anything so I can do that.

You get burnt all the time, especially, if you are cleaning the grill.

4. A bad 'first job' experience can leave students wary about the workplace for years. 'Clocking off' is an oft-mentioned practice of fast food supervisors under pressure to meet tight budgets that means some unfortunate students 'work for free.'

I used to work in a place where it was not very nice. I couldn't wait to leave it. My family told me the bosses weren't professional, they just hated it so it brought everyone else down around them. Sometimes they would be over budget so they would ring up and say we can't come in today. That type of thing, it just wasn't very professional. So I guess that was, being my first job, I just hated work from the start. It just made me depressed having to go there. Now that I have got a new job which I like I actually like going to work. But, I think it affected me for many years.

4.1 'Keep track of your hours,' is the advice of TAFE students to younger workers.

Student 1: When I worked at KFC, there was a manager who clocked everyone off at ten o'clock but we worked until like one o'clock. Everybody works for free. That's why I left.

Student 2: That's why they like younger kids because they don't complain.

When I started I didn't know about clocking off. My friend said he worked for a about three or four weeks and they didn't log him in so he basically worked for free.

Usually [younger workers] don't notice. If they do, they say "I worked six hours on Sunday and I only got paid for five and a half" but the manager says, "Stuff that." That's what happens; that is my experience.

They're very careful not to get caught. That's why they like having fifteen year olds and stuff like that.

Keep your receipts and that so that you can keep track. My brother got ripped off by about \$400 one season because he wasn't registered and he didn't have receipts for the games he referred.

Know your rights and keep track of your hours.

4.2 Quitting is often seen to be the only way to 'move on'.

I was like fifteen and I was just a kitchen hand. They made me stay back three or four hours just to clean and on top of that I was getting ripped off. So, I quit.

Now, I'm looking for a new job, so I not that concerned about it.

I never had a bad ending because I am just polite, even with the pharmacy, I hated it there but I just put in a letter of resignation, said, "Thanks for having me" and that's it.

Don't be shy. Ask what you are entitled to.

5. TAFE students say good employers make education a priority and try to create flexible workplaces. The best employers communicate regularly, formally and informally. However, students of any age are still reluctant to say no to bosses or to colleagues.

Well most of the time with me, every day that I come into work my managers are always there and asking how are you and ask things and I will tell them, I don't really need a formal meeting or anything I will just say oh it's really busy this week and I will say...come and see us if you need time off for study.

Yes, at my work, we have only got a few receptionists so if someone needs a shift covered it's pretty hard to get it done but our managers are pretty accepting because most of us are all studying and they say it is one of their priorities. They understand that school comes first and we do work as hard as we can for their business and we are happy there. I think they have just found a really good balance where I work so it's pretty good.

Well I just know that if I need to take a night off work due to study reasons I know that they will give it to me. But most of the time I think, "Tonight I should not be working because I have got so much stuff to do" but I know that no one will be able to fill in my spot so I will just go anyway. We have regular meetings. A lot of the people at my work are very young as well so there is a lot of good friendships and therefore I have good communication.

5.1 Induction booklets and procedures manuals help answer the questions students might be reluctant to ask.

We have a little code of conduct and also a procedures book for our workplace and it has all of that in it, hourly rate, and yes lunch breaks and stuff.

We have a staff induction book that everyone has to fill in and it has your wage. There is a manual where you get all the answers from and who's available, who's doing the numbers and the tables. You just can just pull it out, it's just in a folder, so if you need to know anything you know where to get it.

All of our stores have one. It's sort of like a folder, it's got like all the information about what to do, when you break, how many hours you work and every store has one. It just sits in the drawer.

5.2 Keeping a commitment to regular rostering is seen as one of the most effective strategies for keeping employees happy and performing well at school.

Well it always starts out well every time we have a meeting. They always saying they will do the rosters two weeks in advance and then it starts to break down. Like we had our last meeting about two, three months ago and about a month after that it started getting to the point where we would only know about a week and a half in advance. Now it's like, I finish my shift on Sunday and since the roster comes out on Sunday, I won't know next week's shifts until I work Sunday night. So I can't plan for the week in advance because I don't know until the day before for the next week, sort of thing. So it sucks how they always say two weeks in advance but it never comes out two weeks in advance.

5.3 Performance appraisals keep students motivated and performing strongly at work.

We have appraisals at our work; half a year and then a full year. With appraisals you get bonuses and you earn prizes as well. Like some incentive to work harder. But we don't really have to ask about raises. We get them if we're working well enough.

5.4 A workplace is for teams; everybody needs to pitch in.

At my work it is much all students except for my boss and his brother who are full timers there, the rest of us are all part timers and students and study. We all cover each others shifts if someone cannot do it but it is pretty much set out around our studies kind of thing, if we can't do it someone will definitely fill in for us or even our boss himself because they understand.

We have got, we can call the shop and our boss will give out the contact number but usually we just tell the boss and he will organise it for us. He's pretty easygoing in that way. As I said it's only a small shop so if someone cannot really fill in, someone might come in for an hour or two just to make sure that we are not struggling in any way.

5.5 Parents have a role to play when things go wrong.

I told my Dad about it and we went down and we went down and had a chat about it. He said he was going to fix it up but nothing ever happened. So, I went and said I was quitting.

Sometimes parents come in and say, "My daughter is working too many shifts." Like they call you up and I think the kids have a hard time saying no, so the parents come in.