



# *Stories of early school leaving*

Pointers for policy and practice

Janet Taylor

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of St Laurence

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## **Abbreviations and acronyms**

ARACY	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CAE	Centre for Adult Education
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
DHS	Department of Human Services
HSC	Higher School Certificate
JPET	Job Placement, Employment and Training
LSAY	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

## Summary

Early school leaving – leaving school before completing Year 12 – is often seen as a problem both by policy makers and by parents, although it was the norm a couple of generations ago. For early school leavers, the pathways to further training and employment can be diverse, and for some difficult, with few full-time jobs available for young workers. School completion is viewed as a major policy objective in Australia, with considerable emphasis at both federal and state government level on increasing school retention rates.

The stories of eight young people who left school early illustrate some of the policy issues for the school to work transition. These issues include measures to improve school retention, youth income support and associated mutual obligation, provision of training and employment, and assistance in access to these.

## Findings and policy implications

Eight young people who left school between the ages of 14 and 16 were interviewed about their experiences when they were aged 17. They were not randomly selected but were all those who had left school early from the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Life Chances Study, a longitudinal study which has followed some 140 young people since their birth in Melbourne in 1990. The eight included three girls and five boys, seven living in Melbourne and one interstate. They came from a variety of family backgrounds, some, but not all, quite disadvantaged. Some, but not all, had longstanding learning difficulties. By age 17, two were no longer living with their parents.

The young people's individual pathways since leaving school were diverse and complex and include experiences of trying to return to school, attempting TAFE and other post-school training, trying to find work and using employment services and other support agencies. In brief, by the end of the year they turned 17:

- Lisa<sup>1</sup>, who had been trying to find employment, had found she was pregnant.
- Tom had left his fast food job and was looking for work.
- Carlo had tried a few jobs, was unemployed and was hoping for a job in construction.
- Brendan was unemployed and wanting to do a mechanic's apprenticeship.
- Duc had returned to school and completed Year 10, and intended to finish school.
- Andy had tried one job and one TAFE course and was doing a 6-month Green Corps program.
- Maddie had completed VCAL at TAFE and was hoping for an office traineeship.
- Emma had completed VCAL at TAFE and was planning to do VCE in a community setting.

## Leaving school

The young people gave multiple reasons for leaving school. Typically they left because of negative experiences at school, rather than because they had an inviting job or training course to go to; only one left primarily for family reasons. They talked of difficulties with schoolwork, for example being overwhelmed with the work or struggling to catch up after missing school, of poor relationships with teachers, and of other students being bullies or snobs:

I left school in the middle of the year, last year. I *hated* it there. I hated the kids. The kids were all snobs. And the teachers, they didn't really *listen* to what I was saying at all. They just couldn't be bothered.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the young people, throughout the report.

Nonetheless, some expressed regret about leaving and advised others to stay although they would not return themselves.

While the formal school setting may not suit all students, the young people's stories suggest schools could better retain others like themselves by providing more active support for those with learning and behaviour difficulties, ensuring a safe school environment, and providing active support for students returning to school or moving schools. In addition more flexible alternative learning environments will be appropriate for some.

### **Income support**

Access to income support was a central issue for some of these young people who were unable to live with their parents while they sought training or employment. In particular, Lisa was suffering considerable financial hardship in spite of receiving Youth Allowance. She was also in unsustainable housing and about to become a mother. Some who lived with their parents felt they could survive with no income of their own, but some of these had very constrained lives.

The young people typically found their contact with Centrelink about income support confusing. The eligibility criteria were not explained to them in a way they understood, suggesting improvement in this communication is required.

### **Out of school training**

Some early school leavers in this study expressed keenness to undertake some vocational training, while others, especially those who had learning difficulties at school, were clear they wanted a job not a course. Some wanted to work where they could learn on the job, for example through an apprenticeship or an office traineeship, rather than undertake further study as such.

Some had commenced but not completed vocational courses which were either too hard or not appropriate. However, others were pleased with their courses and with the assistance provided:

[VCAL at TAFE] It's really good there actually. They're not really strict on you. It was a bit far from here, but I've managed it. And because it's a smaller class, like sometimes there'd only be four people in the class, or maximum 10 to 12 kids, there was always a lot of help. We did all different things.

The young people's experiences of seeking training highlighted issues of access to information and its relevance, high cost of some training, availability of support associated with training, and the question of where the training leads. For early school leavers such as these it is important to be able to plan pathways to training and employment with the assistance of a knowledgeable caseworker or careers counsellor.

### **Employment**

Most of the young people had some experience of paid work. Frequently this was in fast food outlets; mostly it was part-time and short-term and for some only for trial periods. Many had spent considerable time unemployed and looking for work, handicapped by lack of experience and for some, after a time, by loss of confidence. In some cases reactions verged on depression:

I'm really tired of being at home. It's every day you don't feel normal you know, it's shocking.

Employment obstacles raised by these stories include the shortage of full-time work for early school leavers, the availability of on-the-job training and the question of what are 'fair' wages for 16 and 17 year olds. Their failure to find full-time employment reflects the collapse of the full-time

youth labour market over the past decades, not simply individual motivation as some would suggest.

### **Assistance with training, employment and future plans**

Since leaving school, the young people had received assistance with training, employment options and future planning, mainly from family, especially parents, and friends. Some had some assistance from Centrelink and Job Network providers, including JPET, although there were mixed responses to the help given by these service providers:

Centrelink really didn't do much for me actually. I asked them straight out, I'd like a job if you can get me a job, that's all I wanted, they wanted to send me for courses and things like that, I don't like courses, honestly.

While one young woman had found the push from Centrelink to get into a training course positive, others were critical that they did not receive enough real assistance in finding real jobs. Some noted that their Mutual Obligation 'Activity Agreements' contained job search activities that they saw as pointless and that they were treated as numbers.

### **Other life issues**

While the study focused on the young people's pathways in terms of training and employment, some had found that other aspects of their lives were more pressing at particular times, for example dealing with homelessness, pregnancy and domestic violence. Such issues need to be taken into account when working with the young people on their training and employment needs.

## **Conclusions**

Given both state and federal objectives to increase school retention and reduce early school leaving, it is important both to improve the school experience for those at school and to provide well-articulated support and positive opportunities for those who have left.

Drawing together the young people's stories and their advice to others leads to the following priorities:

- There is a need for youth-focused services that are readily identifiable and locally accessible, will listen to and understand the complexity of the young people's lives, have wide knowledge of employment and training options, and can provide or refer to practical assistance.
- A second strand of assistance involves Centrelink and Job Network providers adopting more 'youth friendly' approaches and increasing their specialist youth services and workers.
- A third strand involves supporting the role of parents in assisting their young people's future planning, while taking into account the fact that some young people do not have parents who are able to assist.

The stories highlight some of the complexities and ambivalence of young people seeking work or post-school training. They illustrate how school, work and training fit in their wider lives and suggest a concept of 'complex lives' as a frame for understanding.

The early school leavers in our study illustrate the struggle that some young people have to participate as they would wish in the world of education and employment. They show also the resilience of some young people and the way they can respond to opportunity and assistance.

To ensure that young people are not excluded from appropriate opportunities, new ways of working with them are needed, ways that creatively combine learning, skills development and employment.





# Part I

## Learning from the stories

## Introduction

This report explores the stories of eight early school leavers, using their first-hand accounts to illuminate some of the policy issues for the school to work transition. The eight 17 year olds are participants in the Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal Life Chances Study.

Much is written about the power of storytelling, and we see in the media a frequent requirement to have a personal story accompanying reports of research findings or of changes in policy. Personal stories can provide an effective way for people to relate to wider issues.

This study complements earlier research on voices of early school leavers (Smyth et al. 2000; Hodgson 2007), but with a focus on post-school experiences. It also acknowledges the renewed research interest in Australia in the experience of disadvantaged children and young people associated with the influential UK work of Tess Ridge (2002) and research promoted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (Redmond 2008; McDonald 2008). The study can also illustrate issues raised by some of the large data sets that have followed early school leavers, including the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) (Marks 2008) and the On Track surveys which follow Victorian school leavers annually (Teese, Clarke & Polesele 2007; Walstab & Lamb 2007).

This report outlines the current policy context and describes the research, part of the Life Chances Study. It then outlines the findings from the young people's stories and discusses the implications for policy development. The second half of the report presents the stories of the eight young people in detail.

## The wider policy context

The research was undertaken in the context of the lowest (official) unemployment rate for some 30 years (2007) and of increasing vocational options for early school leavers.

### School completion

Early school leaving – leaving school before completing Year 12 – is often seen as a problem both by policy makers and by parents, although it was the norm a couple of generations ago. The school leaving age is 16 years (recently raised from 15) in Victoria and ranges from 15 to 17 in other Australian states. Many young people are thus not required to remain in school until Year 12.

School completion is viewed as a major policy objective in Australia, with considerable emphasis at both federal and state government levels on increasing school retention. The Victorian Government's target is to have 90 per cent of young Victorians completing Year 12, 'or an equivalent qualification', by the year 2010 (DHS 2006). The Rudd government has promised to boost school retention rates to 90 per cent by 2020 (Rudd 2008). As part of that strategy, it proposes to spend \$2.5 billion on building new trade centres in all of Australia's secondary schools. This would expand the alternatives to VCE/HSC for senior students within school, as well as equipping schools to respond to recognised skill shortages. However there is debate about the benefit of the strategy. It has been suggested (Marks 2008) that increasing the vocational component of schools is unlikely to retain many early school leavers, who are predominantly low achievers, and that resources would be better directed to appropriate post-school education and training once young people have entered the labour force.

In Australia, some 10 per cent of students leave before completing Year 10 and a disproportionate number of these are identified as low academic achievers, boys, Indigenous or from low socioeconomic families (Fullarton 2002). Those who leave before Year 12 have similar characteristics (Curtis & McMillan 2008; Penman 2004).

Teese and Polesel (2003), in reviewing the increased length of schooling, pointed out that economic vulnerability keeps many young people at school but at the price of scholastic vulnerability:

Young people's perceptions of the economic value of completing school are diminished by the experience of failure and by the weak connections between schoolwork and the jobs that are closest to young people. Entering the labour market is often seen as preferable to investing more time in the uncertain benefits of school. (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.133)

Frequently nominated reasons for leaving school during Year 10 included: 'couldn't see where school was heading', 'schoolwork didn't interest me', 'not doing well enough to continue' and 'didn't get on with my teachers' (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.143). Girls were half as likely to leave school early as boys. The researchers also found major geographical differences.

Young people leave school early for a range of reasons. Some actively choose to leave to take up employment, some leave school because they see it as boring or not relevant to them, and many are responding to a mixture of push and pull factors (Teese, Clarke & Polesel 2007; Penman 2004; Dwyer & Wyn 2001). The complexity of the reasons young people leave school is highlighted by Smyth's study of some 200 students (Smyth et al. 2000). Initially the school leavers in that study were categorised, following Dwyer (1996), as positive, opportune, would-be, circumstantial, discouraged or alienated. However these categories were not ultimately useful as so many students could be categorised as both positive in terms of leaving and alienated in terms of school experience.

### **Pathways to employment**

For early school leavers the pathways to further training and employment can be diverse. The annual Victorian On Track surveys provide valuable information about the destination of students leaving school. This includes longitudinal data (Walstab & Lamb 2007) comparing early school leavers with others over a three-year period. The surveys include large numbers of students, but may underrepresent the more disadvantaged school leavers who may not participate in this voluntary survey.

The 2006 On Track survey (Teese, Clarke & Polesel 2007) showed the destinations of those leaving before completing Year 12:

- 15.9% into VET (vocational education and training)
- 30.2% into apprenticeships
- 7.1% into traineeships
- 16.7% employed full-time
- 14.8% employed part-time
- 15.3% looking for work.

Research has shown early school leavers are generally worse off than others on various indicators in later life. There has been some debate about the success of pathways for early school leavers, with LSAY results (McMillan & Marks 2003) showing in 2000 (when they were aged about 20) that early school leavers (left before or at Year 10) were most likely to be *employed full-time* (71%), followed by later leavers (left before Year 12) (65%) and then completers (finished Year 12 but not entered higher education) (61%). However more non-completers than completers (not in higher education) were unemployed.

Among young people not studying full-time, full-time employment levels dropped from 39 per cent to 25 per cent over the last 20 years (Spierings 2005). Many, although not all, of those young people in part-time work wanted more hours of work. While unemployment is often shorter for

young people than for older job seekers, 9 per cent of unemployed teenagers were long-term unemployed in 2004 (Spierings 2005).

The combination of youth wages and part-time work compounds the likelihood of early school leavers in the workforce having very low incomes and remaining dependent on their families. However a number of families are not in a financial position to offer this kind of support.

### **Mutual obligation**

Another area of policy debate is government income support for young people and the working of 'mutual obligation' around income support, 'job search' activities and 'work for the dole'. Centrelink (2007) states: 'Mutual Obligation is about you giving something back to the community which supports you'; and it warns about withdrawal of income support for those who fail to meet various prescribed activities. Under the mutual obligation policy, young people have been compelled to participate in various activities, such as applying for a set number of jobs and attending training courses, if they are to receive income support (Youth Allowance). It has been suggested that such a controlling approach does not work well for marginalised young people (Meijers & Riele 2004). It has also been identified as counterproductive for older workers (Marston & McDonald 2008). In a context where there are limited employment opportunities for low-skilled young people, mutual obligation has been described as an exclusionary policy that fails to meet its own objectives (Edwards 2008). The Brotherhood of St Laurence has called for a more flexible system with greater investment in those seeking work (BSL 2008b).

### **Assistance for early school leavers**

There is a range of programs designed to assist young people at risk of leaving school early to stay at school or to make their transition to post-school training or employment (for example, the federally funded program Youth Pathways, the Victorian Managed Individual Pathways initiatives, or at a local level the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Transition Workers in Schools project and PACTS project for parents). Young school leavers seeking employment and income support are likely to have contact with Centrelink and Job Network providers, along with older job seekers. The federally funded Job Placement Employment and Training (JPET) program was designed specifically to assist young people (15 to 21 years old) who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or experiencing barriers to education, employment and community participation. JPET is now being merged into the Job Network provision. In Victoria, the Youth Transition Support Initiative, available in 12 Local Learning and Employment Network areas, supports young people who have left school to reengage with education and training.

Nonetheless it is likely that some young people leaving school early will receive no assistance, because of lack of knowledge of programs or because there is no locally available assistance. A recent action research study of young people's transitions found their knowledge of local services was very limited and they were confused by the names and acronyms of the programs they knew about (Kellock 2007). The Brotherhood of St Laurence's response to the Victorian Government's Vulnerable Youth Framework (BSL 2008c) has recommended the consolidation of the current fragmented youth programs into a single youth support service.

### **The Life Chances Study**

The eight young people who tell their stories of leaving school are not randomly selected. They are all participants in the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Life Chances Study, a longitudinal study which commenced when they were infants in 1990. Life Chances started as a population study of all babies born in two inner Melbourne municipalities in that year and has followed the families over the years as many have moved away from the original area. Mothers were initially contacted through the Maternal and Child Health Centres which are notified of all births. The families in the study reflected the diversity of the inner area, with both high and low-income families and a range of ethnic backgrounds. The study has followed the lives of those children and explored factors

which influence their life chances, including family income, health, education, family relationships, social supports and ethnic background.

The children and their families have been contacted regularly. The study commenced with 167 infants and 17 years later was still in contact with some 140 families. Reports have been published of the findings for each stage (including Gilley 1993; Gilley & Taylor 1995; Taylor 1997; Taylor & Macdonald 1998; Taylor & Fraser 2003; Taylor & Nelms 2006; Taylor & Nelms 2008).

## Stage 8½

This report presents findings from what we have named stage 8½ of the Life Chances Study. This comes between stage 8, when all the families and young people were contacted at the end of the year they turned 16, and stage 9, which commenced at the end of the year they all turned 17. At stage 8 all those who had already left school were identified. The aim of stage 8½ has been to explore in detail the experiences of those eight young people in order to inform program and policy directions in relation to early school leavers.

The *research questions* included:

- Why did the young people leave school?
- What pathways have they followed since leaving school?
- What are the details of their experiences of seeking work and/or further training?
- What organisations/programs have they been in contact with since leaving school?
- What has proved helpful in their lives since leaving school?

Some of the relevant *policy questions* were:

- Would increasing the options at school increase school retention? Are schools the right place for all young people?
- Where do vocational training courses lead for early school leavers?
- What attention needs to be directed to strengthening the youth labour market?
- How well do mutual obligation and income support work for early school leavers?
- What sort of services would best assist early school leavers with their future plans?

## Method

Prior to stage 8½, we had followed up all the families in the Life Chances Study at the end of 2006 (stage 8). Part of the aim was to identify the early school leavers at that stage. Two had already been identified as 15 year olds in stage 7 and another six were now identified. There was phone follow-up with a number of the early school leavers in December 2006 or early 2007.

Stage 8½ involved first phone interviews in May/June 2007 with the eight early school leavers. Three interviewers who had previous contact with the young people undertook the interviews. These produced some rich descriptive case material on the experiences of early school leaving and the challenges faced in gaining training or employment. The young people agreed to being contacted again and were sent a letter for information and consent outlining the purpose of the next interview.

The eight were interviewed again at the end of 2007, in person, with the exception of one interstate phone interview. They were then all aged 17. They were each paid \$35. Their stories were recorded and transcribed. Each young person's story, with minor editing to remove questions and repetitions, was returned to him or her for comment and approval prior to publishing.

Stage 8½ focused on young people's voice as a methodology, following the important precedent of the large-scale South Australian study *Listen to me I'm leaving* (Smyth et al. 2000). For the face-to-face interviews it was decided to use part of a narrative technique, the Biographical Narrative

Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf 2007). This technique starts with asking for the participant's story in a specific but open way. In our study this opening question was:

Please tell me the story of your life since you first left school, the events and experiences that have been important to you personally. You can begin wherever you like and I won't interrupt.

After the participant ran out of things to say, the second part of the interview involved some prompts based on issues raised by the story. The third part of the interview, not always part of the BNIM, but used in all our interviews, involved following up particular themes of the research if these had not already been covered. This included clarifying pathways, training, work, getting assistance, income and future plans. The final question was about what advice the young person would give to those working with early school leavers. The specific analysis technique of the BNIM was not used in this study; rather transcripts were analysed in relation to the themes that had shaped the study.

The story question produced varied responses among these 16 and 17 year olds. While one girl gave a very detailed description of leaving school and her experiences in training, most gave quite concise responses. The briefest response was:

Not much happened. I left school, I'm looking for work, that's about it. Yeah, that's about it. I don't know what else.

Following more specific questions, this response was elaborated to describe moves interstate, going back to two other schools, part-time work, seeking training, betrothal and pregnancy. Given the participants' responses and the aims of this study, the story question provided a useful start to an interview, but the follow-up questions were invaluable to elicit additional information. The young people were asked if they needed any additional help with future planning and if they asked for this they would have been referred appropriately.

One of the paradoxes of the narrative method is that while the stories of the young people provide a wealth of detail of their lives, especially in comparison with a tick-the-box survey, they raise numerous additional questions and highlight how little we can know about the lives of others, even in a study that has followed families over many years.

Further, the stories could be interpreted in various ways by focusing too narrowly, especially when the young people make seemingly contradictory comments. For example, it would be possible to describe the young people who spend months at home unemployed as 'layabouts' if other aspects of their lives are not taken into account, such as their discouragement from job refusals, their distress at lack of work, their limited education and the wider context of a collapsed youth employment market that offers few opportunities for sustainable work with prospects to advance.

## **The report**

This report presents the findings in two ways: the first part covers significant themes, illustrated with quotes from the young people, and discusses implications; the second presents the individual stories at length, allowing readers to appreciate the individual experiences and make their own analysis. The stories start with a brief outline of the young people's background and then present their own accounts of their lives after they had left school, from interviews conducted when they were aged 16 and 17. The stories have been left to stand on their own, so that the individual situations can be seen in their complexity including changes over time (acknowledging of course that they provide only glimpses of the young people's lives).

However we also wish to draw out from these stories their implications for some wider issues, for example school retention, vocational training, assistance with job seeking, and income support.

Part 1 of the report presents and discusses some themes apparent in the young people's responses and illustrates these with quotes drawn from their stories. The reader can refer to the fuller story of each young person in Part 2. Some may prefer to read the stories first.

## Introducing the eight young people

The eight young people (three girls and five boys) had left school between the ages of 14 and 16. The official school leaving age in Victoria at this time was still 15 years. Most, but not all, came from families that had been on low incomes, and some from highly disadvantaged backgrounds. Two had been among the ten most disadvantaged infants at the first stage of the study (Taylor 1993). The eight were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and their parents included Vietnamese, Hmong and Italian-born as well as Australian-born. There was one Aboriginal young man. Seven of the eight were living in Melbourne at the time of the interviews, although two of these had been interstate the previous year. One was currently living interstate. Some, but not all, had a history of learning and/or behaviour problems over their school years. None was highly engaged with school when they left. The young people are introduced briefly in the following panel. Pseudonyms are used.

## Eight profiles

**Lisa** grew up in a large family on a low income. Her parents were part of the community of Hmong refugees from Laos whose cultural beliefs remain strong. At nearly 15 she chose to be betrothed to a Hmong boy and left school to live interstate with his family. She tried returning to school but found this difficult and spent some time unsuccessfully applying for retail jobs. She hoped to get an office traineeship. At 17 she found she was pregnant and she and her fiancé were struggling to find somewhere to live.

**Tom** had a disrupted childhood after his mother died when he was 10. He lived with various relatives and had a number of changes of school. He had attention and behaviour problems at school. He decided to leave his last school, an alternative school, at 14. At 17 he had had one fast food job but had mostly been unemployed. He was sharing accommodation. His future plans were to 'get a job and hang out with mates'.

**Carlo** grew up in a two-parent family. His parents were Italian-born and his father worked in the construction industry but had at times been unemployed because of injuries. Carlo had attention, learning and behaviour difficulties at school from an early age. He went to an alternative school but left at age 15 after he was assaulted. He first tried a number of work and training options including a carpentry apprenticeship, but at 17 had spent the year at home unhappily unemployed. He wanted a full-time job in construction.

**Brendan's** parents separated and he grew up living with his mother, but with support from his father, in a medium-income family. By Year 6 he was having a lot of health problems and learning difficulties, including an auditory memory disorder. He attended a Catholic secondary college but left during Year 10 because he hated school. He first did a pre-apprenticeship, but at 17 had been at home unemployed for some time. He was hoping to do an apprenticeship in mechanics.

**Duc's** Vietnamese parents separated when he was young and he had a disrupted childhood with many moves of school. At times he lived with his mother and at others with his father who had a stable job and higher income. Aged 15 when he was living interstate with his mother, he left school and also left home. At 16 his father 'rescued' him and brought him back to live with him. Duc returned to school and, at 17, had completed Year 10 and intended to complete school and go to university.

**Andy's** early years were disrupted. His parents separated and he moved interstate with his mother. His father was Aboriginal and died when Andy was young. At 12 Andy was doing well at school and was in an accelerated class. By 15 he disliked school and was truanting

although the school acknowledged he was a capable student. He left school in the middle of Year 11, aged 16. He worked for a couple of months and started a TAFE course but also spent some months unemployed. At 17 he was enjoying working on a 6-month Green Corps program and was 'all right for now'.

**Maddie** lived with her sole parent mother in her early years which were disrupted by health and housing problems. After her mother died, she lived with relatives and then with her father as a sole parent. At 15 in Year 9 she ran away from home and missed a lot of school. She returned but finally left school the following year aged 16. She worked at a fast food outlet and later undertook VCAL as a TAFE program. At 17 she had completed her VCAL year and was hoping to get an office traineeship.

**Emma** grew up in a two-parent family on a medium and later a low income. Music has been an important part of her life and she plays in a local orchestra. By 15 she did not look forward to school and felt she was not doing well. She left school aged 16 at the end of Year 10. She then undertook a VCAL course at TAFE thinking she might want to be a chef. During the year she picked up VCE English at CAE. At 17 she had completed VCAL and the one VCE subject and hoped to finish her VCE at CAE and perhaps become a music or English teacher.



## Findings and policy implications

This section draws together the experiences of the eight early school leavers to address the research and policy questions identified. First the individual pathways are outlined; and then their experiences are considered under the headings of leaving school, income support, training, employment, and gaining assistance with training and employment. Under each heading a policy question is explored in relation to the data. The section concludes in drawing together these issues to discuss the policy implications.

The young people are identified by pseudonyms. For their fuller stories the reader should refer to Part 2.

### Pathways

The young people's individual pathways since leaving school are diverse and complex and include experiences of trying to return to school, attempting TAFE and other post-school training, trying to find work, and using employment services and other support agencies. Table 1 gives a very brief outline of their pathways but does not show the variety of short-term jobs, work experience and courses that the young people undertook, or the geographic mobility of some. It does show that by the end of the year they turned 17, one had returned to school and one was being paid in a short-term employment program, but none of the remainder was in full-time work or study.

**Table 1 Pathways since leaving school**

Young person	Age left school	Year left	Main activity 2006	Main activity 2007	Main activity December 2007 Age 17
Lisa	14	Yr 9	back to school twice	unemployed	unemployed
Tom	14	Yr 8	unemployed	fast food job	unemployed
Carlo	15	Yr 8	apprenticeship	unemployed	unemployed
Brendan	15	Yr 10	pre-apprenticeship	unemployed	unemployed
Duc	15	Yr 9	unemployed	back at school	back at school, Yr 10
Andy	16	Yr 11	unemployed	unemployed	Green Corps
Maddie	16	Yr 10	school	completed VCAL at TAFE	unemployed
Emma	16	Yr 10	school	completed VCAL at TAFE	planning VCE

### Leaving school

The eight early school leavers had attended a variety of schools: a high status Catholic college, two alternative schools for young people with difficulties in the mainstream and various government secondary schools.

The young people explained their reasons for leaving school. For most this was to do with difficulties at school, although for one leaving school was due to family reasons. Having left school some contemplated returning and, while most rejected this idea, two had tried doing so. Their accounts of leaving school and, for some, of returning are outlined below

### Problems with school

The young people who had left school often gave multiple reasons for leaving. The most frequent reason was problems at school. Most disliked some aspect of school and two had been asked to leave (Emma, Maddie). The aspects mentioned included difficulties with school work, for example being overwhelmed with the work (Emma) or struggling to catch up (Lisa); poor relationships with

teachers (Andy, Brendan); and other students being bullies (Tom, Carlo) or, in one case, snobs (Brendan). In terms of multiple reasons for leaving school, Andy, an Aboriginal student, mentioned his own laziness, but primarily treatment by the principal of his state high school:

The main reason ... there were a number of contributing factors. I guess it was partly to do with my own laziness, but a bit of harassment at school from my teachers, the principal. He was just hassling me, giving me a hard time, pulling me out of class for unknown reasons. ... he'd like to pull me out in front of my friends to make an example of me. I thought it was a bit of prejudice, or discrimination.

Two specified they 'hated' school:

I left school in the middle of the year, last year. I *hated* it there. I hated the kids. The kids were all snobs. And the teachers, they didn't really *listen* to what I was saying at all. They just couldn't be bothered. (Brendan)

I left school because I felt a bit afraid of this year. It's not just the workload, it's the whole environment, it's the other kids, it's an all girls' school. It was just the other kids I was with, I mean I hated going to school. (Emma)

Some mentioned that they had been truanting or skipping school before they finally left (Andy, Maddie, Duc). According to Duc, when he moved interstate school was 'boring', it was too easy and when he started skipping school, 'Nothing happened, they didn't call or anything', and he felt his mother was too busy with a failing business to be involved.

The two young women who had been asked to leave school (Maddie, Emma) described their experiences. Maddie had missed school on a number of occasions when she ran away from home. The school had helped her return but eventually she felt they gave up on her:

They kicked me out. Just too many absences, stuff like that ... First they were helping me. I was doing all right, but then I kind of stuffed it up for myself.

Sometimes the reasons received different prominence at different interviews. For example, Emma first spoke of feeling afraid of school, but at the next interview described how she had been asked to leave:

At the end of last year I had been called into one of the offices and two of the teachers came and said to me that because I wasn't doing my work that I couldn't do VCE there. I suppose they 'suggested' that VCE wasn't for me.

Sometimes a single event was presented as the trigger for leaving school: for example, Carlo had left after being 'belted up'.

### **Family reasons**

Lisa's situation was rather different in that she left school initially for family reasons rather than because of problems at school. Lisa left school when she moved interstate to live with her fiancé and his family. She had liked school and wanted to continue, but felt she had to earn some money. After a few months working, she went back to school, but then left again when they moved back to Melbourne where she started at a third school. This time she left (in Year 10) because she found catching up with the schoolwork too difficult and she received no special assistance. While it is unlikely that school action could have influenced her staying at her first two schools, appropriate assistance might well have kept her at the third school.

## Returning to school

The young people reflected on returning to school as a possibility, but most rejected it. Lisa felt she would still struggle with the work if she returned and mentioned she would then be in the year below her younger sister: 'I'd be so upset going back to Year 10'. Andy had thought about going back but 'I've sort of snapped out of the school life mode' and also the principal who upset him would still be there.

Emma really wanted to leave her particular school:

I've thought about going back to school, but I don't want to do it. There was just so much pressure ... what I *really* wanted, I think, was not to do VCE at that school.

Ambivalence about school is well illustrated by Carlo, who said his parents had asked him about going back to school. On one hand he said, 'I don't want to go back to school, school's for some people and for some people it's not'. But he also said, 'You want to go to school, I regret it you know, if I could go back to school, which I don't want to really, but it would be good to get some more education in me'. In terms of identity, another young man (Tom) was clear: 'I'm not really a school person'.

Duc, who had returned to school on moving back to Melbourne, had just finished Year 10. His father's support in this was important. Duc claimed he was getting on well at school except that he found maths a struggle. He reported he had received no extra help from the school with what he had missed.

## Policy questions

*Would increasing options at school have increased retention? Are schools the right place for all young people?*

The young people's perspective is probably well summarised by Carlo above: 'School's for some people and for some people it's not'.

While increased vocational options and other proactive interventions at school could well help keep some young people engaged with school, this would not have made much difference to many of our eight early school leavers, including those who left because of conflict with or harassment by teachers and fellow students, those who did not feel safe at school, those who left for family reasons and moves interstate or for those who had been asked to leave school. Those who had long histories of learning difficulties seemed unlikely to become engaged with school because of extra options. For example, Brendan enjoyed his mechanics pre-apprenticeship at TAFE and one could postulate that he might have stayed at school if such an option existed there; however he left school mid year because he 'hated' school.

While school may not be for everyone, these young people's stories suggest some avenues for schools to do more to help retain students at risk of early school leaving. They suggest the need for more inclusive, student-centred learning to promote young people feeling they are 'a school person'. In particular schools need to provide:

- active support for those with learning and behaviour difficulties
- a safe school environment
- better support for young people returning to school or moving schools, especially interstate.

## Income support

The Centrelink payment, Youth Allowance, is the main form of income support for young people. It is available to full-time students aged 16 to 24 and to unemployed young people aged 16 to 20, subject to parental and personal income tests and, for the unemployed, to Activity Agreements, under the banner of mutual obligation.

There has been considerable community debate about ‘mutual obligation’: there is concern on the one hand that young people who are unemployed may become ‘dole bludgers’ if they receive income support and on the other hand that given the low levels of Youth Allowance (the dole), that they may be experiencing serious deprivation and social exclusion.

In brief, of the eight young people who were early school leavers, at the time of the interview when they were aged 17:

- One received a training wage on the 6-month Green Corps program (\$270 per week) (Tom).
- Three received Youth Allowance (Tom, Lisa, Maddie).
- Four had no formal income and relied solely on their parents (Carlo, Brendan, Emma, Duc), some, but not all, of whom had incomes above the eligibility level for Youth Allowance.

The young people talked about the difficulty in access to Youth Allowance and, for some, the adequacy of the payment. All the young people had made some attempt to get the allowance, but half had been unsuccessful.

Of the three receiving Youth Allowance, one (Tom) who was not allowed to live with his father was receiving the independent rate (\$348 per fortnight). He was sharing accommodation and felt he could ‘survive’, but he had trouble affording ‘clothes and stuff’ and had been to the Salvation Army for vouchers for food. Two (Lisa, Maddie) were receiving the basic rate of \$190 per fortnight. Their responses to it were very different. Maddie who was living with her father and did not have to pay board could manage well enough. However Lisa’s financial struggle was dominating her life. She was struggling to meet bills and pay for food in a shared house, and she and her fiancé were trying to find other accommodation before their baby was born. Her fiancé was receiving an apprenticeship wage.

We have nothing for our future. When we move out we’re going to be struggling to save up to buy food and stuff like that, bedding and a bed and especially the baby coming up and there’s nothing prepared for that as well and no money for that as well.

Some of the other young people may not have been eligible for Youth Allowance because of their parents’ income, but it seemed that two from low-income families had not received Youth Allowance because of bureaucratic hurdles (Emma, Carlo).

I haven’t got Youth Allowance. I went to Centrelink a while ago and I tried to get an allowance, but they wouldn’t give me it, because I didn’t have enough points type of thing. They wanted a driver licence, birth certificate, school reports, all that type of stuff, I only had one school report because I didn’t really care about it at the time. I had a bank card but they wanted more identification of myself and I didn’t have enough so they wouldn’t give it to me, so Centrelink has given me nothing. No dole, never. (Carlo)

Duc had made a variety of attempts to get Youth Allowance and was not impressed. When he had left his mother’s home and was living on a farm with his brother he tried unsuccessfully to get Youth Allowance (presumably at the independent rate):

I've been to Centrelink, with my dad, my brother and my mum, all separate times. I can't get Youth Allowance because of my dad's income, it's too high. I could get it when I was living with my mum and then it just got cut off for some reason, I'm not sure why, I think we didn't go to the meeting or something, the interviews ... When I was with my brother it didn't work out either, we tried to do that because he needed help paying the rent either way. So I was going to apply for Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance but when I went to the interview she just said I didn't have a reasonable enough excuse, I'm not sure why.

Physical access to Centrelink was an additional problem:

When me and my brother were living on the farm it took us at least an hour or two hours to be able to get the closest Centrelink, and my brother's car broke down and she kept asking us for an interview ... And sometimes when I got there she went 'no' I can't have an interview today, which meant I wasted two hours of walking. I had to walk there, because in the country everything is a long way. It was in a country town. (Duc)

### **Policy question**

*How well does mutual obligation and income support work for early school leavers?*

The mutual obligation policy is of interest in relation to early school leavers who are sometimes stereotyped as bludgers and as not fulfilling their part of the obligation. Carlo had indeed spent the last year at home unemployed, but had found the experience quite distressing: 'It's every day you don't feel normal you know, it's shocking'. He certainly could not be described as a dole bludger as he had not even received a payment. He also did not want to accept money from his parents and so lived a very constrained life, seldom going out. Nonetheless his future hope was for full-time work, sticking to a trade and 'work, work, work'.

Access to income support was a central issue for some of these young people who were unable to live with their parents while they sought training or employment after leaving school. In particular Lisa was suffering considerable financial hardship in spite of receiving Youth Allowance. She was also in unsustainable housing and about to become a mother. Some who lived with their parents felt they were able to survive with no income of their own, but some lived very limited lives.

The young people typically found their contact with Centrelink confusing and did not have the eligibility criteria explained to them in a way they understood. This suggests an area for improved communication.

The young people's experience of the 'mutual obligation' activities are outlined below. It is pertinent to ask what is a reasonable expectation of 15 to 17 year olds and a reasonable provision of 'service' to them in a mutual obligation framework.

### **Out of school training**

Between them, the eight early school leavers had experienced many kinds of training since leaving school. In brief these included:

- VCAL at TAFE (Emma, Maddie) – both completed
- VCE subject at CAE (Centre for Adult Education) (Emma) – completed
- pre-apprenticeships (Brendan, Carlo) – one completed (Brendan), one not completed (Carlo)
- apprenticeship – not completed (Carlo)
- IT course at TAFE – not completed (Andy)
- Green Corps – completed (Andy)
- no training (Lisa, Tom, Duc).

The main issues raised by their experiences included their access to information and its relevance, the cost of training, the availability of support associated with training, and the question of where training leads.

### **Looking for training**

Some of the early school leavers were keen to have further training to prepare them for a job. In contrast others simply wanted paid work and to learn on the job and a couple were quite resistant to being sent to courses (Carlo, Tom). For some this reflected limited literacy or numeracy, or learning difficulties.

#### *Information and relevance*

Finding information about the range of possible training options was not necessarily easy for the early school leavers. They had received some information from such sources as school careers counsellors (Emma), the internet (Andy) and Centrelink or Job Network providers (Maddie, Lisa).

Finding the right and relevant course was a further problem. For example Andy had decided to follow up his computer study at school by doing IT at TAFE. He waited for months to start a TAFE Certificate III course in IT technical support which he had found on the internet, only to discover it was too specific for him, that providing IT phone help was too 'stressy', and that most of the other people in the course were already working in IT.

Brendan had completed a 6-month pre-apprenticeship which he enjoyed but it was not the course he or his parents had expected; and Carlo had commenced a pre-apprenticeship which rapidly proved to be beyond his capabilities (see below).

#### *Cost of training*

Cost of training was raised by Lisa as a major barrier to her doing a course. Her Job Network provider tried to get her into a 6-month tourism course but she could not afford the \$900 fee. So she was looking for an office job with a traineeship, 'so I can get a certificate while doing a job as well'.

### **Experiences of training**

#### *VCAL at TAFE*

VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) is a Year 11 and 12 qualification focusing on 'hands on' learning, which is often called a vocational equivalent to VCE. It can be offered within schools and also by TAFEs and community organisations. It can be done at three levels (foundation, intermediate or senior).

At the end of the year, two young women had just completed VCAL at TAFE. Maddie had a sense of achievement and felt her father was very proud of her.

Maddie had enjoyed VCAL at TAFE:

It's really good there actually. They're not really strict on you. It was a bit far from here, but I've managed it. And because it's a smaller class, like sometimes there'd only be four people in the class, or maximum 10 to 12 kids, there was always a lot of help. We did all different things. We did a lot of projects, they were the main things. Once I knew what the project was, what I had to do, I was just working my arse off, always bringing work home, staying back at TAFE. I'm just glad I got it done. I liked the physical activities. I liked going out for sport and leisure and stuff – and we got marks on that as well. And cooking. We did a lot of films, just monologues about ourselves and all that stuff. And it was good.

In contrast, Emma's parents had been very upset that she was doing the lower status VCAL rather than staying at school and doing VCE. Early in the year Emma had said she liked doing VCAL at TAFE: 'They're smaller classes, it's more friendly'. By the end of the year she reflected that she knew that she would find the VCAL course easy: 'Well I liked that, but at the same time I knew it wouldn't give me very many opportunities'. Emma had changed her career direction and no longer wanted to be a chef. She had also found the cooking classes intimidating. Halfway through the year she picked up Year 11 English at the CAE and this gave her the confidence to decide to try to complete VCE, without having to return to what she saw as the pressures of her former school.

[My parents] didn't want me do VCAL instead of VCE because they thought that that would give me much less options. I agree with them now.

*Support available with training* was important for both these young women. Maddie spoke about her 'worker at TAFE', a caseworker linked to her VCAL program:

My worker at TAFE, they know what I'm looking for and stuff like that. So I've got a lot of help there and they help me out with court and dentist and everything so it's really good. I've got lots of help there ... They help you out if you need your learner's [permit]. I had a couple of court cases – transit fines on public transport – they took me to the court. I got all that worked out. Dental, I get free dental and my worker takes me there. It's helped a lot ... My worker at TAFE, she's going to help me out with a traineeship ... She's always helpful and she'd always talk to me and listen to what I had to say and stuff like that. But even my teachers at TAFE, like they're always nice and caring and stuff like that.

For Emma, the advice she received from careers counsellors at school and at TAFE proved important and she found their knowledge of a range of options very helpful.

### *Pre-apprenticeships*

Two young men had tried pre-apprenticeships. Brendan who wanted to become a mechanic completed a pre-apprenticeship in mechanics after he left school:

I liked it because I was doing what I enjoy doing, pulling apart stuff and putting it back together ... I didn't learn heaps, but I learnt pretty much the basics. I'm not sure what you need to learn going into an apprenticeship.

However he said he and his mother had thought the pre-apprenticeship would help with his VCE and count towards an apprenticeship only to find it did not: 'It was the wrong course'.

Carlo had briefly tried a pre-apprenticeship in cabinet making:

Cabinet making, that's with a ruler all day and I don't really understand rulers and markings and big drawings and you've got to do with stuff like that. It really confuses me. He tried to teach me, the guy at the TAFE, but I said 'No, it's not me'. So I left there.

### *Green Corps*

Green Corps is an Australian Government youth development and environmental training program for young people aged between 17 and 20 years. At the end of 2007, Andy was undertaking a Green Corps program, doing bush regeneration. He enjoyed the outdoor work, working in the nursery and that he got paid, 'but it's only a 6-month course'.

I think I'm all right for now. I don't really know where I'm going. But that's not exactly a bad thing. I don't really know at the moment, but I'm sure as options open up to me I'll make good decisions now. (Andy)

## **Policy question**

*Where do post-school vocational training courses lead for early school leavers?*

One of the key questions raised by these young people's experiences of training was where the training course led. What would be available after 6 months of Green Corps (Andy)? Would Maddie, having completed VCAL at TAFE, be able to find an office traineeship? Or would Lisa, with no extra training, be able to find the office traineeship she wanted? And what about Brendan who had completed his pre-apprenticeship, but then had been unemployed at home for many months?

The experiences of these young people point to the importance of being able to plan pathways to training and employment with the assistance of a knowledgeable caseworker or careers counsellor, and also raise the issue of the cost of a preferred course.

## **Employment**

Most of the young people had some experience of paid work. Frequently this was in fast food outlets and mostly it was part-time and short-term and for some only for trial periods (Tom, Maddie, Duc, Lisa, Emma). This was the sort of work school students do in addition to their study rather than jobs leading to a career. Two had rather different work experiences, one (Andy) having worked full-time in a computer assembly factory for a couple of months and another (Carlo) having tried assorted labouring work in the construction industry, an area he wanted to continue to work in. One (Brendan) had had no paid work.

Some of the young people had undertaken 'work experience' as part of their school program. This included work in an office (Maddie with her sister) and in a local library (Duc). Four had some experience of working with one of their parents (Lisa and Duc with their mothers in fast food, Brendan and Carlo with their fathers in trades).

Their experiences raise issues both about looking for work and of the actual employment. Difficulties in looking for work included both lack of experience and loss of confidence, while employment issues included the nature of the work, youth wages, travel and hours of work.

## **Looking for work**

Some of the young people spoke of their discouragement and, at times, depression at being unable to find work.

Lisa illustrates mixed experiences of finding work. Her first job in a fast food outlet she found easily, referred by a friend. She later had a few weeks work experience in the fast food place where her mother worked. She wanted to work in retail but had been interviewed and rejected:

I just looked for work and I struggled to find a job in Melbourne because I don't have much experience. I have nothing that qualified me for a job and stuff like that. I looked for mainly retailing. It's hard cos most of them needed people with qualifications or experience in retailing which I don't have, only in food. I want to work in a shop that sells stuff like products or clothing or something like that. It's turned out I've been unsuccessful. I've been applying for Seven Eleven three times and they took me for an interview three times and I got the same letter back ... I didn't get the job. I've tried like clothes shops and Broadmeadows shopping centre and Priceline ... Employers want you to be confident – which I'm not really, I'm not that talkative – and better experience, which I don't have.

Her proposed solution, with her caseworker's assistance, was to seek an office traineeship with on-the-job training.

We asked the young people what they thought employers wanted and what sort of work they were best suited to. These did not always match. Some expressed confidence in their abilities for the workplace,



for example being friendly (Tom) or organised (Maddie), while others were much less confident, for example Lisa (above) and Emma who said she was ‘not too good at beaming at people’.

Some young people clearly lost confidence from job refusals and from unsuccessful work trials:

I was quite discouraged by both of those jobs I went for earlier in the year not working out [two food outlets]. I was thinking maybe I could try again for another job like that, but maybe I’m just not for that kind of job, maybe I’m too clumsy or something. (Emma)

The impact of being unemployed could be quite depressing, as Carlo illustrated:

For all this year I haven’t done anything, I’ve been sitting at home, I’ve been actually looking for work and I haven’t found any, so yeah ... I actually look through the papers. Look through all the internet, Yellow Pages, ask people around in the area, family, anything I can find actually. I’m really tired of being at home. It’s every day you don’t feel normal you know, it’s shocking.

Some had difficulty motivating themselves to apply for jobs. For example, Brendan, who was hoping in due course for an apprenticeship, spoke of applying for part-time supermarket work at one interview but had not really followed this up six months later. Duc spoke of getting a part-time job now that he was back at school:

I’ve applied for heaps of jobs, well a few. I did Safeway’s, McDonalds, pretty much those two.

### **Experience of work**

Work in fast food outlets was the most common paid employment for these young people as mentioned above. This was not work that they wanted to continue into the future and some saw such jobs as tied to their young age and low ‘youth wages’. Most expressed some dislike of this work; some specifically mentioned rude customers (Lisa, Maddie).

Maddie and Tom both ‘hated’ McDonalds and both mentioned the wages.

McDonalds was my first job. It’s the only job I’ve ever had really. Just work at the register, learn how to make McChickens, McFilets, Fillet-o-fish. But it was horrible ... You’d always get rude customers, always complaining, and I hated it. I got along with everyone, I didn’t have any arguments or problems with any of the people working there, it’s just I didn’t like the job. They couldn’t put me on seven days because of my age, but they pushed it pretty much. They were always asking me to stay back and because they were paying me \$6.60 an hour it was cheaper for them. But it was all the time. (Maddie)

I hated it. I wanted to do register and that and I was just stuck out the back cooking all day and I hated it. I guess in the end I just left because I didn’t want to be cooking every day .... To start with it was hard, but I just got used to it. I was casual ... I was like earning \$60 a week. So it was basically crap. I was on like \$5.90 an hour. I hated it. That was youth wages. (Tom)

Wage levels were also an issue for Andy in a different industry. The feeling he was not being paid fairly was a main reason for his leaving the job, although this led to unemployment rather than higher wages:

I started working for a computer company and they built high tech computers for industrial companies and the guy there ... he [paid] me for an administration wage but he would get me to do technical stuff so I would be missing out of probably about 30 bucks of wages. So I left that job too because he was underpaying me. (Andy)

Carlo, who had struggled academically at school, weighed the merits of the various jobs he had tried and how physically or mentally challenging they were, and preferred the bricklaying:

Carpentry wasn't a bad job. There was a bit of difficulties with all the power tools. It was pretty dangerous and with experience you would pick it up, but it was a pretty dangerous job. Plus the foremen there, they treated you pretty bad, always swearing at you, pushing you around ... Concreting ... you need a lot of experience for that type of job ... Carpentry, that was not too bad, but cabinet making was the hardest, I'll tell you that. Those drawings. All that stuff confused the hell out of me. Bricklaying was one of the hardest physically, mentally it had to be cabinet making. Bricklaying was probably one of the most easiest, that had not much involved in it and it was a bit enjoyable ... I want something a little bit heavy, not too heavy.

Transport was quite a problem for those wanting work (or training) but too young to drive, even if they had access to a car.

Travel was another factor of me leaving the job, you see. I accepted the job but it was in a big, hilly industrial area, just out in the middle of nowhere. I'd have to get up at six, the job would start at nine. I'd get up at six, catch a six-thirty train, then I'd have to get a bus into the industrial estate of where I'd work. And from when I'd get there, I'd have to walk another five minutes to where I'd work, in the middle of just bush and industrial sort of buildings and stuff. And then I'd have to sit out the front because I'd get there at about eight and I'd have to sit there about an hour or an hour and fifteen, just in the cold. (Andy)

Carlo had been offered help with a bricklaying apprenticeship but the jobs were all in the distant new outer suburbs:

There's no transport out there unless I get out at one station and walk another 45 minutes or half hour ... all the work's too far out, I don't have a car, a licence, I'm not even 18 to get your P's, so it's out of the question for me.

Two young people spoke of long travel times to get to training but felt it was worth it (Andy doing Green Corps and Maddie doing VCAL).

### *Hours*

Most of the early school leavers were hoping for full-time not part-time work as a step towards their adult work lives. For example Maddie, having completed her VCAL wanted a full-time job (an office traineeship):

I've got too many friends that are in part-time jobs and I don't see the point in it ... Wherever I work that's what I want to do for the rest of my life. I don't want different part-time jobs, even though it helps on your résumé.

### **Policy question**

*What attention needs to be directed to strengthening the youth labour market?*

Three issues that emerge from the experiences of the young people in this study are the availability of full-time work for early school leavers, the availability of on-the-job training and the question of what are 'fair' wages and hours for 16 and 17 year olds.

[Note: To give an example of pay at one of the workplaces some of the young people discussed: the current (September 2008) pay rates for 15 and 16 year olds at McDonalds range from \$7.04 per hour (part-time and full time, first 15 weeks, 5am to 1am) to \$10.17 (casual, after first 15 weeks, 1am to 5 am) (Personal communication).]

## Assistance with training, employment and future plans

Since leaving school, the eight young people had received assistance with training, employment options and future planning, mainly from family and friends, and to some extent from Centrelink and Job Network providers, although there were mixed responses to the help given by these services. Some had contact with specific youth services such as JPET (Lisa, Tom) and workers associated with TAFE programs (Maddie, Emma). Some had had contact with other services including housing, health, legal, counselling and welfare services as they tried to sort out their wider lives. The young people also gave advice on what would help other early school leavers.

### Family and friends

The most frequent source of help with training and employment seemed to be family, particularly parents. Family help included providing work experience, pointing out appropriate job advertisements or opportunities and sorting out training options.

Andy saw his mother's help as more useful than Centrelink in gaining his first job:

I think Mum found the job in the paper. And she just mentioned it to me – ‘You should really apply for this’. So I wrote a quick covering letter explaining my situation and I attached my résumé to it and it was the first proper full application that I actually spent time on. Compared to a Centrelink application where I just send my email and my job seeker ID number and I just go ‘Yeah, send’. But this one I actually just sat down and properly applied for and within two hours they actually rang me back and said, ‘Could we have an interview with you?’. And I said, ‘When?’ and they said, ‘Tomorrow’. And I said, ‘Wow, definitely’ ... My mum's very helpful. She finds things for me and if I ever get muddled up and don't what to say to someone over the phone she'll always suss it out for me and help me through that stuff, so she's great like that.

Andy was enjoying Green Corps which he joined because of a friend:

A friend introduced me to Green Corps, someone who is doing it with me ... his parents suggested it to him and he suggested it to me.

Friends sometimes helped in finding an immediate job (Lisa, Tom) but were less involved in young people's future planning:

Mum and Dad, they're supportive in everything. My friends, not really. I don't really talk to them much. They are at school. (Brendan)

It should be noted that only two of the young people were living with both natural parents, four were with one parent and two (Lisa, Tom) were living with neither parent. Some parents had very limited ability to provide any assistance, because of their own financial and employment stresses or mental health problems. Three young people had experienced the death of a parent during their childhood.

### Centrelink and Job Network

Centrelink provides income support for eligible young people and refers those who are seeking work to various Job Network providers to undertake ‘activities’ which ideally would lead to employment. Activity Agreements are ‘negotiated’ between the job seeker and the provider (although this is not an equal relationship) and are seen as spelling out the ‘mutual obligation responsibilities’ of the job seeker, who may lose payments if these are not met. Activities may include ‘intensive job search’, paid work experience, vocational education or training, and other programs. Disadvantaged young people may be referred to the youth program JPET (Job Placement, Employment and Training) for more specialised assistance.

The young people did not necessarily remember the names of the agencies they had contact with and, for example, sometimes referred to Centrelink when they were probably discussing a Job Network provider.

Maddie had found the working of the mutual obligation requirements helpful in focusing her on study and in linking her with a course:

When I left school last year I was on the Centrelink payments for a while, just looking for work. And then I started working at McDonalds. I lasted there about four months – I hated it – so I quit. And then Centrelink told me I can't just be doing nothing, and I thought no, I want to study, I want to do my VCE. So Centrelink got me on to this TAFE. They actually gave me a few options of different TAFE I could go to, they said it's actually a lot easier than school – high school, you know. It was to do VCAL, it's like VCE, like an alternative.

For Lisa, her experience of Centrelink depended on the staff. She identified the help she received from Job Network, although it had not produced a job after three months.

Centrelink, they pay me. It just depends on staff. Some are quite easy and over and done with. Some are really difficult, they ask you a lot of questions and are a bit more difficult to get paid. And they ask you to bring more statements ... Job Network, they just help me look for a job, update my résumé, like helping with letters, sending letters, finding jobs.

However, many of the other comments about Centrelink and activity agreements were more critical: the contact had seldom resulted in the young people obtaining work or useful training. Carlo complained of being offered courses when he really wanted a job:

Centrelink really didn't do much for me actually. I asked them straight out, 'I'd like a job if you can get me a job', that's all I wanted. They wanted to send me for courses and things like that. I don't like courses, honestly.

Centrelink put me through a course ages ago but I left there because they really pissed me off. I don't remember what it was called. It was like a tutoring place. (Carlo)

Access to a computer was the only help Tom felt he had been given:

Job Network? I had to go to them, because I was on Centrelink I had to go. They don't really help you, they just give you the computer and let you search. They don't really do anything. They make you do it. I've had to do my résumé myself. I think [Job Network] was helpful because I always had the computer access when I needed it. I don't have the internet at the moment. I go to my friend's place.

Andy felt that the Job Network Activity Agreement requirements were 'a bit silly' and he resented being treated 'like a number':

Activity Agreements, so they make you sit there in classes with unemployed people and you have to just learn to write a covering letter, find advantage points in interviews and do all that tactical stuff in jobs ... job seeking, presentation really. How to set out a résumé, covering letter, all that sort of stuff. And then they make you sit there for about two hours searching jobs, ten jobs a day, which sort of seemed a bit silly for the fact that if you were really trying for a job, there wasn't going to be that many jobs. But it was compulsory, so if you wanted to be a draughtsman you'd have to find ten draughtsman jobs.

Employment services. They're a bit 'We'll help you, but only because we're getting a cut for ourselves' sort of ethic that I see them having. My experience with them is not very helpful. They can be helpful but only on a very minimum basis. They'll barely help you scrape through because they don't really care if you get a job or not, they just want to know if you can get the numbers down so they can get paid. You feel like a number when you work with them, you don't feel like a person. (Andy)

Lisa did not see the point of her Activity Agreement with Job Network as she felt she was expected to look for jobs simply to fill in the form:

I don't think there's a point if I just have to put down jobs ... I'd find jobs on the computer at Job Network and some would be on paper that I would phone and call them and ask them. I did that for three months.

## JPET

It seemed only two or three of the young people had been referred to JPET. Maddie was receiving good support from a worker and mentioned JPET but was not sure if this was the name of the program. In Lisa's case, JPET was helpful in seeking work and in dealing with her wider issues, but in Tom's case it was not.

JPET, she's been helping me look for a job but then after I found that I was pregnant she is helping me look for housing as well. She's been referring me to, like this group called Crossroads, they've been getting support letters so we can get a place. She's been looking out for properties for us and she's been calling up these services. (Lisa)

I've been on JPET but they cancelled it. Centrelink organised it and then JPET cancelled it. I think it's because I was too far from there. Because I'm there and they're in another area. I think I had a meeting, that was it. It was like four months ago. I had no interest in it. (Tom)

## Other aspects of life

While the focus of the above has been on the young people's pathways since leaving school in terms of training and employment, some had found that other aspects of their lives were either more central or at least exerted a major influence at particular times. These influences need to be taken into account when working with the young people on their training and employment needs. To give some diverse examples:

- Lisa from a Hmong refugee family had chosen to have a traditional betrothal at age 14. At 17 she was expecting a baby. Strong cultural factors meant that she could not live with her own relatives and she and her fiancé were struggling to find accommodation.
- Maddie was contemplating a restraining order against a violent boyfriend, who often came to her TAFE and caused trouble and had recently attacked her.
- Duc had tried unsuccessfully to get money to cover living costs when living on a farm with his unemployed brother. They were subsequently attacked in a house raid.

Another important factor which could influence their current planning was depression or other mental health problems. It seemed that at least two of the young men had some element of depression which was caused or exacerbated by failure at school and/or unemployment.

## What would help others

The young people were asked, 'If you were advising a service about how to help young people who have left school to plan for their future, what would you tell them?' Some gave brief responses while others responded at some length, and reflected on their own experiences. The responses included direct advice to young people, some of which could have been seen as good advice to themselves, but also included what they had found helpful in services they had dealt with and where such services could be usefully located.

Their advice to other young people included the importance of school and education and of sticking to one thing (Andy, Carlo, Maddie). They wanted services providers who were very knowledgeable about the options available (Lisa, Emma) and who would listen to the young people and find out what they wanted (Emma, Brendan, Tom, Duc). Their suggestions for services included phone

services and services located in schools, libraries or youth centres or at Centrelink or Job Network (Lisa, Emma, Duc).

Two of the early school leavers (Andy, Carlo) had clear advice for other young people to stay at school. They both valued aspects of school, although neither themselves wanted to return.

I'd just say, 'Stay at school'. Because you don't realise how many social connections you have at school ... Cos it's not really that long, I wish I had finished it ... But I'm not interested in going back. I figure I've got all I can for me out of the school system that I could. (Andy)

You want to go to school, you want to learn, you know, one day you want to get somewhere. (Carlo)

'Stick to one thing' was the good advice from Carlo who had made a number of unsuccessful attempts at different jobs:

I would say to the blokes that had just got out of school and need a job or something: dedicate your job, like pick a job like bricklaying, carpenter, electrician, plumber whatever, a good trade, because in the future tradesmen are going to be very wanted you know, they're going to be getting probably paid a lot, because there's not many left. And so I'd say to the blokes or the guys, dedicate a job, stick to it, work, finish your apprenticeship, then when you want you can start up your own business, make heaps.

Maddie had similar advice, reflecting on her experience of successfully completing VCAL with help from a caseworker:

Just got to put your mind to one thing and just do it. You know you can't be thinking about other things, you've got to have your head cleared and think this is what I want to do and you've just got to do that one thing. Doesn't matter how hard it gets or whatever, try and get the help and support, and you've got to stick to the one thing and don't go off track and go and just do something else.

Some identified the importance of service staff who were knowledgeable about the options for young people and who could make appropriate referrals:

They need to know all the options; knowing how to get more information about all those options; I suppose being understanding and all of that. I think the most of what is needed is knowing all the available options at that time. I suppose you don't have to know all the details but know how to get further details. (Emma)

It was important that service providers were good listeners and understanding:

You need to be able to get a person that's a good listener, they've actually lived that kind of life before, but if I had to interview someone else who was just like me I'd be able to understand them much more. (Duc)

Duc's suggestions for services ranged from improving Centrelink to phone services:

[Centrelink] could be made more helpful, it needs to be more helpful for kids. I reckon the interviews should be made at home or something. Cos, depending on the teen, it's really hard for him or her to be able to get there ... Like youth services, I've just heard about those. Like the 1800 Kids Helpline. I think it should help some kids. It's a good place to be able to talk to. *[Duc had tried the phone service himself but only talked for a second because his mobile phone had a low battery.]*

### **Policy question**

*What sort of services would best assist early school leavers with their future plans?*

The experiences of the eight young people highlight the important role of families and suggest the relevance of supporting parents in supporting their children, but it must also be acknowledged that some young people do not have parents who can help.

The young people identified problems in the way Centrelink and Job Network work with early school leavers. This suggests the need to make the role of the services clear and 'youth friendly', to help young people understand the system, and to ensure any activities are potentially helpful rather than 'silly'. Other issues include convenient location (or outreach) and service providers who will listen carefully. Continuity of relationship with service providers is important for these young people.

### **Discussion of policy implications**

Smyth and colleagues (2000) point to the need to move beyond the quantitative research that frames early school leaving in terms of attributes such as socioeconomic status and gender, and see how the larger issues are embedded in the everyday experiences of the young people. This report explores the narratives of eight young people as a way to illuminate issues for early school leavers.

The stories highlight some of the complexities and ambivalences of young people seeking work or post-school training. They illustrate how school, work or training fits in their wider lives and suggest a concept of 'complex lives' as a frame for understanding. The complexity of their lives include the issues around their age (as 14 to 17 year olds); gender; ethnic or racial identity; their family situation, including family income and support; their health, including mental health; and their academic and other abilities; as well as the wider and changing social, economic and environmental context in which they live.

### **School retention**

While young people who leave school early, as a category, do not do as well on various measures as those who complete Year 12, the policy answer cannot be simply to keep them all at school, especially given the negative experience schools have provided for some young people. For an inclusive approach there need to be in place both school-based programs to engage young people better and also flexible alternative learning situations.

The early school leavers in this study had typically left school because of negative experiences at school, rather than because they had an inviting job or training course to go to. Nonetheless, some clearly expressed regret about leaving and advised others to stay.

Given both state and federal objectives to increase school retention and reduce early school leaving, it is important to both improve the school situation for those at school and to provide well-articulated support, opportunities and a positive image for those who have left.

The challenge for schools is to become more inclusive of all students, including those with learning and behaviour difficulties. While high school retention is a major policy goal, it should be remembered that not all schools are making this a top priority. Smyth and colleagues (2000) found that some schools manipulated school discipline policy and guidelines to get rid of difficult students given the school league tables push. The On Track survey (Teese, Clarke & Polesel 2007) found half the early school leavers said they would have stayed on at school, had they had encountered 'more respect or care' while at school.

The experiences reported by the young people in this study confirm the continuing relevance of earlier studies. For example, our one Aboriginal student spoke of harassment and discrimination and being singled out in front of their friends. Smyth et al. (2000) noted from their interviews that

the trouble Aboriginal students experienced in staying at school seemed to come from being harassed by racial slurs, feeling shame in classrooms and not being able to get help. The same study also found not feeling safe at school, which involved lack of adequate supervision from teachers, was an important interference with completing school.

There is a challenge for some schools to acknowledge that ‘School is not for everyone’ is a reason, not to ‘get rid’ of difficult or struggling students, but rather, as demonstrated by the Brotherhood’s Transition Project, to assist them within the school and to promote positive post-school pathways.

Policies are needed that facilitate schools’ promotion of school retention in an inclusive framework. Schools need to:

- actively support and engage young people with learning and behaviour difficulties
- provide a safe school environment
- actively support those returning to school or changing schools (especially those arriving after the start of the school year, and those from interstate)
- increase awareness among the teaching profession of the issues that reduce young people’s school engagement and retention.

### **Post-school training**

The *Victorian Education and Training Reform Act 2006* provides a guaranteed place in TAFE institutions, the Centre for Adult Education, Adult Multicultural Education Services or participating adult community education providers, to young people who have not completed Year 12 or its equivalent.

Some early school leavers in this study were keen to undertake some vocational training, while others, especially those who had struggled most at school, were clear they wanted a job not a course. This raises the question of whether this is a false dichotomy and what combinations of work and training are possible. The main issues relating to post-school training raised from the experiences of our early school leavers are information and relevance, cost, availability of support and the question of where the training will lead.

Disadvantaged young people need easy access to expert sources of information about training options. Two of the young people who had undertaken TAFE courses felt that these were not the right courses for them and were not what they had expected. They (and their parents) required more than internet information to make good decisions.

Cost of training was a major barrier for one of the young people who, as a 16 year old, had no way of meeting a \$900 fee for a tourism course her Job Network provider recommended. While the others did not focus on cost as a barrier, current policy development suggests it could become a bigger barrier. It has been reported that the Victorian Government, with federal support, is planning to greatly increase TAFE places, providing a government-funded training place for those without post-school qualifications, but this would also involve almost doubling the current fees for students (Tomazin 2008).

The value of good individual support associated with training courses was illustrated by two of our early school leavers. They included one doing a TAFE VCAL course, whose caseworker was able to assist with a range of life’s complexities that could well have prevented her from completing the course. By contrast, some others dropped out of TAFE courses with no apparent follow-up.

The question of where particular courses will lead is significant for those undertaking them. However clear pathways are not always apparent. For example, how often does a pre-apprenticeship lead to an apprenticeship, or where does VCAL lead?



## Youth employment

The early school leavers in this study had difficulty in getting full-time employment. This reflects the collapse of the full-time youth labour market over the past decades, not simply individual motivation as some would suggest. Their work had been predominantly in the fast food sector, part-time and short-term. Having left school, some had a strong desire to work where they could learn on the job, for example as an apprentice or an office traineeship, rather than to undertake further study as such. How can employers best provide training for young workers? More on-the-job training is one of a number of requirements that employers need to provide to support young workers in their first jobs (Tresize-Brown 2004). The development by TAFE colleges of customised responses to meet the needs of both individuals and employers is recommended by a recent Brotherhood of St Laurence submission on skills reform (BSL 2008a).

The debate about low youth wages involves, on the one hand, assertions that junior wage rates (an age-based percentage of adult wages that increases each year, generally up to age 21) are necessary if inexperienced young people are to be competitive in the labour market. On the other hand there are concerns about young workers living in poverty and issues of equity and exploitation. Youth wages were mentioned by a number of the early school leavers who felt they were being exploited and that they were primarily a source of cheap labour, being asked to work longer hours because of their age. It was important for them that wages were seen to be fair. Having to travel a long way to work was a barrier for some of the young people where there was limited public transport. There is a policy issue of the wider importance of public transport for this group with no access to alternative transport because of their youth.

### *Income support and mutual obligation*

How does the policy of mutual obligation work for disadvantaged young people? This policy is of interest in relation to early school leavers who sometimes get stereotyped as dole bludgers and as not fulfilling their part of the obligation.

While one young woman in our study seemed to have found the push from Centrelink to get into a training course positive, others were more critical in that they did not receive enough real assistance in finding jobs. They noted that their 'Activity Agreements' contained job search activities that they saw as silly or pointless and that they were treated as numbers. Their comments are similar to those of older unemployed people (Marston & McDonald 2008).

Some of the eight early school leavers were unemployed but were not receiving Youth Allowance and so were technically not 'dole bludgers' but may also not have been counted in the unemployment statistics. These included young men leading very constrained lives who seemed quite depressed.

While there have been some special programs, such as JPET, for disadvantaged young job seekers, they had not reached all those in this study who could have benefited from them. In reviewing income support, policy makers need to take into account the needs of young early school leavers and particularly those unable to live at home.

What could the government do to better fulfil their side of this 'mutual' obligation for early school leavers? Two main points are:

- more accessible, more adequate income support for those young people in need
- meaningful assistance in finding jobs, rather than 'make work' Activity Agreements.

### **Providing assistance to early school leavers**

Drawing together the early school leavers' stories and their advice to others leads to the following recommendations. First there is a need for youth-focused services which are readily identifiable and locally accessible and where staff:

- will listen and understand the complexity of the young people's lives
- have wide knowledge of employment and training options
- can provide or refer to practical assistance.

A second strand of assistance involves Centrelink and Job Network providers adopting more 'youth friendly' practices and increasing specialist youth services and workers.

A third strand involves acknowledging and supporting the role of parents in assisting their young people's future planning, while taking into account the fact that some young people do not have parents who are able to assist.

The stories support the Brotherhood's call (BSL 2008c) for consolidating assistance into a readily accessible single youth support service.

## **Conclusions**

The early school leavers in our study illustrate the struggle that some young people have to participate as they would wish in the world of education and work, in spite of a context of nearly full employment. Their stories highlight the complexity of their lives and the diversity of their situations. They show also the resilience of some of the young people and the way they can respond to opportunity and assistance. The findings confirm the importance of listening to young people's own stories of their transitions from school to training, to work, or to unemployment.

Given the strong policy push to increase school retention, the report highlights the challenges for policy and programs to meet the diversity and complexity of the situations of early school leavers. There can be no 'one-size-fits-all' policy response<sup>1</sup> in encouraging school completion, in providing vocational training or in assisting in job seeking. These Life Chances case studies demonstrate the need for more flexible and integrated approaches to maximise the social and economic participation of young people, acknowledging the financial and other barriers they face. These approaches are needed both within schools and through out-of-school options.

New ways of working with young people are needed to ensure they are not excluded from appropriate opportunities, ways that creatively combine learning, skills development and employment.

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## Part 2

### Eight stories of early school leaving

## Presentation of the stories

This section presents the eight young people aged 16 and 17 who told us their stories of their lives since leaving school. They include three young women (Lisa, Maddie and Emma) and five young men (Andy, Carlo, Brendan and Duc). Pseudonyms are used.

The young people were all born in Melbourne in 1990 and turned 17 during 2007. They have been part of the larger longitudinal Life Chances Study since infancy. Most of the stories are based on interviews in mid 2007 and late 2007. For those who had left school earliest, some of their accounts from earlier interviews are included. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and have been edited to present them more as the young people's stories by removing the interviewers' questions. There has been some reordering of topics, and some removal of repetitions and of everyday expressions such as 'you know' and 'like' to improve readability. Subheadings have been added to facilitate comparisons across the stories. While there is often some overlap between what the young people told us in the first and second interviews, the interviews are reported separately so that the continuities and the changes over those months remain evident. The young people have seen and approved copies of their stories before publication.

The stories are presented in order of age at first leaving school. In brief, by the end of the year they turned 17:

- Lisa, who had been trying to find employment, had found she was pregnant.
- Tom had left his fast food job and was looking for work.
- Carlo had tried a few jobs, was unemployed and hoping for a job in construction.
- Brendan was unemployed and wanted to do a mechanic's apprenticeship.
- Duc had returned to school and completed Year 10, and intended to finish school.
- Andy had tried one job and one TAFE course and was doing a 6-month Green Corps program.
- Maddie had completed VCAL at TAFE was hoping for an office traineeship.
- Emma had completed VCAL at TAFE and was planning to do VCE in a community setting.

The stories cover the general themes of leaving school, looking for work, employment experience, training since leaving school, sources of assistance in future planning, income support and the advice the young people give to others. They also include topics that are shared by only two or three of the young people, for example leaving home or returning to school, and some which are unique to an individual.

The stories of the eight young people are stories of transition and possibility. They are also stories of frustration and fear, of fantasy and fun. They show glimpses of the lives and thoughts of the young people and raise many questions about both their pasts and their futures.

I would like to thank the young people who shared their stories about leaving school and their lives since and wish them well for their futures. Our interest in their stories includes the way they highlight the complexity and diversity of young lives and the need for this to be better understood by those planning policies and working with young people making the transition from school to the world beyond. We hope that sharing these stories will play a part in such understanding.

## Lisa

### Background

*Lisa is the daughter of Hmong refugees from Laos who had arrived in Australia a couple of years before her birth. Her parents had little formal education and for much of her childhood her father was unemployed while her mother looked after the seven children. The family was on a low income throughout her childhood and school fees were a problem.*

*At 6, her father described her as healthy, a smart, quiet child who was having no problems with school and got on very well with others.*

*At 11, she enjoyed school though she was anxious about going into secondary school. She wanted to be a doctor.*

*At 14, she had left home and school early in Year 9 to live with her boyfriend's family interstate. She thought she might go to school there but needed money to pay for her keep.*

### December 2005 (age 15)

*At 15 Lisa was living interstate with her boyfriend and his family and was working part-time in a fast food shop which she didn't like.*

### Leaving school

I left school when I moved up here. I wanted to go to school, but then I had this other decision in my head like if I go to school I don't have enough money for myself up here, so I decided to work instead. My parents weren't happy at first, but then, I don't know now.

School was good. I got on well with all of the teachers mostly. Sometimes I just felt like staying home, sometimes I felt like going to school. Sometimes if I didn't want to attend an activity at school like I just didn't go. Since I went off school I can't remember anything that I learned now.

I'm working right now at Red Rooster. I've been working three months and a half now, about four hours and a half a day, three days a week. I don't like the rude customers. I get \$8 an hour. I want to work in a clothes shop, but it's really hard to find a job. For the future, I'm just hoping to find a better job. If I have a family that might stop me.

### December 2006 (age 16)

*Early in 2006 Lisa started school again interstate for a few months. She then returned home to Melbourne with her boyfriend to live with her father. She tried Year 10 at a new school for a couple of months (July to September) but found it too difficult. By the end of the year, aged 16, she was looking for full-time work.*

### June 2007 (age 17)

*Six months later she said she had been unsuccessful in getting a job. Her Job Network provider was trying to help her get into a 6-month tourism course at TAFE so she would have some training, but she could not afford the \$900 fee. She was living with her boyfriend at her cousins' house but they wanted to move.*

I've been looking for a job. It's a struggle because of not much experience and qualifications so I want to do a course but couldn't afford it. I'd send my résumé to places but they don't call back and I call some but they already have someone for the job. I look in the newspaper. Job Network is very good, they try and help me find jobs.

I don't know what's going to happen in the future. I might be moving, trying to get a place in the high-rise, me and my boyfriend. We were living with my parents for a year and we moved to my

cousins'. Now I really want to move to Fitzroy. There are more opportunities for jobs than where I am now. My boyfriend's got an apprenticeship, a mechanic.

### **November 2007 (age 17)**

*Now aged 17, Lisa was due to have a baby in May. In this interview she gave details of her Hmong wedding in 2005 when she was aged nearly 15 and her boyfriend, from the same clan as her father, was nearly 17. She said it is usual for Hmong girls to marry at 15. She referred to her 'boyfriend' or 'fiancé' to others, but to her 'husband' among the Hmong community. She rather regretted marrying so early, and thought an older age would be better, maybe 18. Her younger sister wants to wait longer than 15 because she has seen what a struggle it is for her. Her parents gave her some money for the future but that was spent on her husband's car. They would have an Australian marriage when she was 18. Her main problem now was finding somewhere to live, because for strong cultural reasons she couldn't live with her own relatives when she had her baby. She and her fiancé hoped to move into public housing in inner Melbourne.*

### **Since leaving school**

Not much happened. I left school, I'm looking for work, that's about it. Yeah, that's about it. I don't know what else. The only thing I thought about was getting a job, that's all.

### **Leaving school, moving interstate, work and return to school**

I became engaged to my boyfriend which is my aunt's cousin. I was nearly 15. Is that illegal? First I looked for a job and I worked for three months so I could get a bit of money. I was referred by one of my friends up there. They just pretty much took me in without my résumé. Up there I didn't pay anything. We were living with his parents and we didn't have to pay anything.

After three months of working I went to school, Year 11. It wasn't difficult, the school work up there, mainly nearly the same thing as Year 9 down here, but it was a bit different in some ways. I think it was for about five or six months and then we came back to Melbourne.

I was kind of having a difficulty with his mum, we didn't really get along, so my parents said I could move back down here to live with them and he came back down with me.

### **Second return to school**

In Melbourne I went back to school in Year 10. It was quite hard compared to Year 11 up there. I didn't really do much in Year 9, then I went up there to Year 11 and I didn't do much there, then I came back to Year 10. Basically what everybody learned you had to catch up and you don't really know much. It was difficult. I didn't tell them, but I think they did know that I was struggling. It's just mainly the work, just understanding. I left (which my father told me not to, but I was struggling for a while) and I thought I'd get a job.

### **Work experience**

When I came down, I think it was in January this year, I went to have work experience at my mum's workplace for one month. A takeaway food place. They just gave me training for one month. They just needed a few people ... It was \$7 an hour. It was bit hot. There was a lot of cooking. Working with my mum, it was good, but it was a bit scary. She was always nagging me. If something that I did wasn't as good as the managers thought, they wouldn't say to me but they would go to my mum, 'Oh tell your daughter to do this'. They wouldn't tell me. So mum would always come nag me. I'll never ever work with my mum again.



## Looking for work

I just looked for work and I struggled to find a job in Melbourne because I don't have much experience. I have nothing that qualified me for a job and stuff like that. I looked for mainly retailing. It's hard cos most of them needed people with qualifications or experience in retailing which I don't have, only in food. I want to work in a shop that sells stuff like products or clothing or something like that. It's turned out I've been unsuccessful. I've been applying for Seven Eleven three times and they took me for an interview three times and I got the same letter back. Three times they called me for an interview, but then I didn't get the job. I've tried like clothes shops and Broadmeadows shopping centre and Priceline and I've been trying in Preston as well.

Employers want you to be confident – which I'm not really, I'm not that talkative – and better experience, which I don't have.

I just kept looking for a job. I was looking for a job that has a traineeship as well, so I can get a certificate while doing the job as well. I looked through the Job Network and the internet. I didn't actually go on any course because the fees and all that were too expensive. So I'm looking for a job with a traineeship. We've been applying for administration or office traineeships. Me and my Job Network [worker], she's been helping me apply.

School again? No I don't think so. It's still the same. I think that I'll still struggle if I go back to school. Especially when I left in Year 9 and Year 11 and Year 10. My sister's doing Year 11. I'd be so upset going back to Year 10.

## Assistance

My family, they're a bit busy. I don't have friends. I just rely on my brothers. My brother, he's 20, he's doing TAFE in Victoria University, he hasn't got a job yet. My dad's working, paying off the mortgage.

My fiancé's got a mechanical apprenticeship. He did want me to get a job but now I'm pregnant I don't know, especially if we're going to move out on our own, and going to struggle a little bit. He's doing second year apprentice. He's being paid gross \$484 a week. I get a fortnight \$190 from Centrelink (Youth Allowance).

Centrelink, they pay me. It just depends on staff. Some are quite easy and over and done with. Some are really difficult, they ask you a lot of questions and it's a bit more difficult to get paid. And they ask you to bring more statements. Now I'm with JPET, I'm looking for housing, I'm filling in the form but I'm not looking for a job. It's the same as if you're looking for a job except that it doesn't have the four columns if you're looking for a job. It just asks if your address or any thing has changed or anything needs to be updated. It's once a month now. I have to have the Activity Agreement with JPET and not with Centrelink looking for a job. It's better, because I don't have to look for a job to put in there. I don't think there's a point if I just have to put down jobs. I was looking for a job before, like putting them down on my paper as well. I'd just put in my normal Job Network job searching job on the computer. I'd find the jobs on the computer at Job Network and some would be on paper that I would phone and call them and ask them. I did that for three months.

Job Network, they just help me look for a job, update my résumé, like helping with letters, sending letters, finding jobs.

JPET, she's been helping me look for a job but then after I found that I was pregnant she is helping me look for housing as well. She's been referring me to this group called Crossroads, they've been getting support letters so we can get a place. She's been looking out for properties for us and she's been calling up these services ... I think JPET there's not much they can offer me, but she can help me with getting little things like a car seat and things.

### Looking for somewhere to live

I want to move to the flats [high-rise public housing]. It will be a very long wait. I went to see them before and I needed a medical certificate updated so I updated that and they said when I updated it to give them a call and find out how long the wait will be. It's to say that I'm pregnant, confirming that. I gave them my medical certificate. She already sent me last month but they hadn't updated on the computer or anything. The lady told me to call back when I get the letter.

We can't live with my aunty ... I don't know, it's something spiritual, you are not allowed to stay in the house, unless it's your house or your boyfriend's house or his parents. I have to move out like before the birth. If my boyfriend had relatives down here we'd be able to live with them, but he doesn't have any relatives here and the relatives that we have are my parents' relatives. Now that I'm pregnant and having a baby, in our culture I'm already in his clan now. I can't live with my parents. I can't go back to their house for like one month ... My mum, she goes, 'If you were a boy you'd be able to come here, but you're a girl, you're going to have kids, you can't'. Then she goes that she loves me a lot but I can't go there.

### Pregnancy

I went to see the doctor last month and the baby is all fine and my blood and everything is all fine. [*Lisa had not expected to get pregnant and would have chosen to wait till she was 18.*] Because I went to see the doctor before that and they go I'm not able to get pregnant at all. I went and had my ovaries checked and I had confirmed that I had ovary disease and they were pretty sure I can't get pregnant. I went and got an ultrasound done on my ovaries as well. I was sad that I could not get pregnant ever in my whole lifetime ... After two months, no medication, nothing, then I got pregnant.

### Money

I've had a struggle with finances. There were problems with my father and I had to move out. We're living with my aunty. My boyfriend's working but I'm not and it's getting a little bit difficult. We pay for half all the bills and we buy food as well. We are just struggling a bit financially now. It's just overcrowded and the finances. Six people and it's only got small rooms. We've got to try and get another place – like private rental, but we're struggling with finances because it's too expensive. We're just waiting on public housing, that's going to be a long wait.

Mainly it's just bills, paying for the car insurance, I mean the rego, and paying for his school fees next year, cos he's doing TAFE as part of his apprenticeship, that's one of the things we have to start saving for. Trying to pay the bills, because this month bills come in, and food as well, and there's not much we can buy because he gets \$400 per week and with petrol and everything it's all gone in one week.

I think my father is struggling with money to pay the mortgage, my brother's not working at all, he's doing Centrelink and he has a baby as well because his girlfriend is living with him. And my father's got three other kids with him, my brother older than me, and two other younger [ones].

### The future

*When she was 11 Lisa had wanted to be a doctor. Did I? I don't know, I probably never got there. I haven't got there at all. It was just a dream.*

I'll look after the baby for a few months or maybe after one year until I can get some child-care; if I can get that I'll look for a job. I'll see what happens after I give birth. It depends on where we live. It depends if we get a private rental or public housing. If we get private rental probably in the northern area where I have my grandmother as well and if she's able to look after the child, then after I'll get a job, but if she is not able I will stay home.

We have nothing for our future, when we move out we're going to be struggling to save up to buy food and stuff like that, bedding and a bed and especially the baby coming up and there's nothing prepared for that as well and no money for that as well.

**Advice for services to help young people**

I don't know. Just referrals, if they can't help you, to some other place that can help you. Maybe help through a school, youth centres, maybe at Centrelink and Job Network.

## **Tom**

### **Background**

*Tom had lived in a low-income family throughout his childhood.*

*At 6, the family was stressed financially and because of the mother's ill health, but she said as a family, 'We've been fine'. He had repeated prep because he had not had a good start to the year. His mother died when he was 10.*

*At 12 he was having attention and behaviour problems at school and some conflict at home. He wanted to be a fireman.*

*After this he was in and out of the care of different relatives.*

*At 14 Tom left school, during Year 8, having been to a number of secondary schools. For a while after leaving school he attended a part-time youth education support program run by a welfare agency.*

### **December 2005 (age 15)**

*At 15 he had finished the education support program and he was talking of getting work in a bar.*

### **Leaving school**

It's hard. You just settle into one school, then you've got to move again ... Well I'm not really a school person. Just waking up early and having to go to school. I just decided second term not to go. All the kids were just real terrors. They were big bullies.

The Education Support program, they just encourage you to go to school and stuff like that. They just start later and finish earlier and it's not so long. Yeah, they're nice. It's just easier to get along because there's not so many of you. There's four of us.

### **May 2007 (age 16)**

*At 16 he was living with his grandmother and working part-time at a fast food outlet with no specific plans for the future.*

I left school, oh god, about two years ago. I moved back to my dad's and school was far away so I just didn't feel like going back. I didn't want to go back. My dad was fine with it. I just didn't go back anywhere else. I just stayed at home. I didn't try to get work. I moved to my nan's. I just got too much for my dad. It's been all right ... I'm just trying to find somewhere on my own. Like anywhere, just a one-bedroom place of my own.

I'm working at McDonald's. That's fine. About two months. It's my first job. I just went on the internet. I just cook hamburgers and stuff.

### **November 2007 (age nearly 17)**

*Aged nearly 17, Tom was sharing a public housing flat with an older female friend. He was no longer working.*

### **Since leaving school**

I haven't done much since I left school. I've only like ... I worked at McDonalds for like nine months, and then I left there. I haven't done much. I've had two weeks of work for the Grand Prix, I was a cleaner there. Other than that, I've just been looking for work since I left McDonalds.

## Moving out of home

I didn't have an option to move from my dad's. He basically kicked me out, he didn't want me there so I came to live with my nan. And we had a fight and then she kicked me out and then I moved over here. I don't talk to my dad much any more.

It wasn't really like he asked me to leave, DHS [Department of Human Services] said I couldn't live there. Ever since my mum died I wasn't allowed to be there. Because of his health and that, I was too full on for him. DHS, they're out of my life now. They would be there nearly every second day, to see my dad. But I wasn't allowed to live there, his house wasn't the best. They rang Nan. Nan said I could go there. I like living over here because all my friends are over this side, so I knew everyone around here.

My friend lives here, so I can share with her. I've known her for like about six years. She's an adult. But she doesn't give me many rules, so I just go out and party when I want to and do what I want. It's fun, but in another way it's becoming boring because I'm going out all the time and it's boring. I'm getting sick of partying.

When I first moved in to Nan's it was like strict. I couldn't go anywhere. I felt trapped. She wouldn't let me go out with my mates ... she did to start with, but then once I started coming home at one and two in the morning she got stricter. Nan just had an argument with me for coming home late and then she sort of told me she wanted me out of there so I had to move over here. I just ran over to my mate and she just said, 'You can come here'.

## Employment experience

*McDonalds.* To start with I didn't want to work but when I got used to it so ... but then I just quit cos I was just doing the same thing every day. And I hated it. I wanted to do register and I was just stuck out the back cooking all day and I hated it. I guess in the end I just left because I didn't want to be cooking every day ... I gave them two weeks' notice that I was leaving. Cos they only put girls on registers, they don't put the males on there. I don't know, I don't understand it ... To start with it was hard, but I just got used to it. I was casual. It's down the road. It was pretty easy to get the job. I just applied and got it. You have to do two weeks' training. They pay you. The money was crap. I was like earning \$60 a week. So it was basically crap. I was on \$5.90 an hour. I hated it. That was youth wages.

[*Cleaning work.*] That was boring. I was just cleaning every day. And I hate cleaning, so I just did it for the money. I just got on the internet and applied for it. I seen it was available so I applied for it and got an interview and got it. It was just two-week contract work. It was heaps better than McDonalds, because we had smoke breaks whenever we wanted and we just stopped working whenever we wanted and had breaks. Because the boss was in the office and we were wherever, we were like a 15-minute walk from the office so we stopped whenever we wanted.

## Looking for work

I've applied for a few jobs but I haven't heard back from them. I just go on the internet. I just go on JobSearch. Now there's like heaps of call centre jobs. I just apply for all of them. Yeah. It's what I'm good at. I don't know, I just like talking on the phone. I'm friendly, so ... Employers, they're just looking for energetic people that have good customer service skills.

I don't want to do training. Not at the moment.

## Assistance

I just do what I want to do. They're just supportive with me, my nan and my friends. I don't really need any help with anything at the moment.

Job Network? I had to go to them, because I was on Centrelink I had to go. They don't really help you, they just give you the computer and let you search. They don't really do anything. They make you do it. I've had to do my résumé myself. I think [Job Network provider] was helpful because I always had the computer access when I needed it. I don't have the internet at the moment. I go to my friend's place.

I've been on JPET but they cancelled it. Centrelink organised it and then JPET cancelled it. I think it's because I was too far from there. Because I'm there and they're in another area. I think I had meeting, that was it. It was like four months ago. I had no interest in it.

When I did need help I just went to the Salvation Army. When I needed them I just needed like food and stuff and they just gave me vouchers and that.

### **Money**

I get Youth Allowance [\$348.10 a fortnight independent rate of Youth Allowance with no rent assistance]. I get enough to survive. The only thing I have trouble with is clothes and stuff.

### **The future**

*At 15 Tom said he wanted to work in a bar but he no longer wants this.*

Well I started drinking and I hate drinking now. I hate alcohol.

For the future I don't know, I just want to work in customer service, so. In the next year or two? I don't know. Just do what I'm doing now. Get a job and hang out with mates.

### **Advice for services to help young people**

I don't know. I don't know how they work. Just like caseworkers that sit there and ask you what you want.

## Carlo

### Background

*Carlo grew up in a two-parent family in which his father was employed in construction and the family was mostly on a medium income, but there were times of unemployment, health and financial problems.*

*At 6 he liked everything about school, but was seeing a specialist about his attention disorder.*

*At 12 his learning, attention and behaviour problems had meant he changed in Year 6 to a special school. He looked forward to school and wanted to be a mechanic.*

*At 15 he left school (an alternative school) during Year 8.*

*At 16 he had tried carpentry, concreting, a cabinet making pre-apprenticeship and was hoping to start a bricklaying apprenticeship.*

### June 2007 (age 17)

#### Leaving school

I was going to this school ... it wasn't a school for me really. I was at a primary school at the start, and from there I had a lot of fights, a lot of arguments, so I had to go to a school that *taught me* to control behaviour problems. But the school that I went to, it was crazy you know, it wasn't really for me. I was in a school at the time studying and this guy came into the school, I dunno what it was about. There was me talking to a girl, he took it that I was talking to his girl, something like that, and he came into the school and really belted the hell out of me. I didn't want to go back to school any more, you know, I felt fear. So I stopped going to school and tried to find some work.

My parents said to me, you know, 'School is school, you should go, but if you don't want to go to school you should find an apprenticeship fast or some work'. So I've been looking everywhere ... I really really want to start working because it's really getting to me now. They've asked me a couple of times do I want to go back to school, or do you want a tutor, [to] help you out. I don't want to go back to school, school's for some people and for some people it's not. So really, I just want to work, that's about it.

### December 2007 (age 17)

*Carlo had been at home unemployed for almost a year.*

#### Since leaving school

Since I left school, what did I do? I did a carpentry apprenticeship, it went for about five to six months and it didn't work out. So from there, I started getting some experience in concreting with my father, he took me on, but the job wasn't for me because it was a bit over the top. From there I done a pre-apprenticeship in cabinet making, I done that for about two days and it was a bit too hard for me. So I couldn't do it. From there I actually did one day of bricklaying as an apprentice. I enjoyed the job, it was pretty good but it was summer at the time and I was, I dunno, it was pretty hard to do, like a very hard job and I couldn't do it.

From there, for all this year I haven't done anything, I've been sitting at home, I've been actually looking for work and I haven't found any, so yeah, from last year the work, what I've been doing isn't too much, just at home, looking for work, asking people. I actually look through the papers. Look through all the internet, Yellow Pages, ask people around in the area, family, anything I can find actually. I'm really tired of being at home. It's every day you don't feel normal you know, it's shocking.

I have a couple mates employed, but I don't really go out much any more because I don't work, I don't like to ask my family for money. I had one mate he was doing a baking apprentice, I don't know if he's still doing it, but he was doing all right. I've got another mate who was doing a brickie apprenticeship, bricklaying, he's doing seven days a week about 12 hours a day, an apprentice, he's earning good money, he's doing well, he's learning, he's laying bricks, he's pulling mixers, he's carrying mud, he's doing pretty good. The rest, most of them from the schools I went to, they weren't too good, so most of them are probably on the dole, or could be criminals, you never know. They chose to live that life, most of them are just on drugs and stuff like that, so I don't associate with them really, I see them, I say hullo or whatever.

### **Employment experience and options**

Carpentry wasn't a bad job. There was a bit of difficulties with all the power tools. It was pretty dangerous and with experience you would pick it up, but it was a pretty dangerous job. Plus the foreman there, they treated you pretty bad, always swearing at you, pushing you around and you can't hit back, because you'd get sacked right away and it's not good anyway. I've got offered actually, about a month ago, from my uncle if I wanted an apprenticeship, but he told me it's five years. I said I'm not going to do an apprenticeship for five years. I want to be qualified in about three or four you know. He said all right. That would have been in the city, on a building site there. That would have been a carpentry apprenticeship, a chippy.

Cabinet making, that's with a ruler all day and I don't really understand rulers and markings and big drawings and you've got to do with stuff like that. It really confuses me. He tried to teach me, the guy at the TAFE, but I said, 'No, it's not me'. So I left there.

I was doing bricklaying. It was a hard job, I'll say that, but there was not much education involved because I don't have much, you know. It was pretty basic really, I understood it pretty good. I still understand it now, not all of it, but mixes and stuff like that. I actually enjoyed that job but it was a bit over the top in the summer, because the boss never had no breaks, nothing, it was just bang, straight up, it was 'Finish this while we can'. Yeah that wasn't too bad.

Concreting, I was starting to pick it up. Not really, because the screening and that, I wasn't too good at. It's not too bad I guess, but you need a lot of experience for that type of job.

Carpentry, that was not too bad, but cabinet making was the hardest, I'll tell you that. Those drawings. All that stuff confused the hell out of me. But bricklaying was one of the hardest physically, mentally it had to be cabinet making. Bricklaying was probably one of the most easiest, that had not much involved in it and it was a bit enjoyable.

A friend of mine offered me a landscaper job, but I sort of wanted at the time a bricklaying job. Like I was dedicated to it, I wanted this job. I've actually done work in gardens, helping out family, friends, [but] it's not really my thing. It's a pretty good job, you make big money if you work for yourself as a subcontractor. But I don't know. I've never really looked into it. I've actually got a good family friend, my uncle's son, he's doing it at TAFE, he's saying to me it's great, you know, the work it's not light and it's not heavy, it's just nice, you've got a nice pace and he said it's a pretty good job. But me, I just want something a little bit heavy, not too heavy, just something not bad you know.

A friend did help me out. I asked him for a brickie apprenticeship, but the work it's all in Caroline Springs and all up that way and I don't even have a learner's permit, you know, and there's no transport out there unless I get out at one station and walk another 45 minutes or half hour. But all the jobs are up that way, all the housing, a lot of units and stuff like that going on. And in the city there is work, but it's hard to get in, apparently very hard. So he did ask around for me. He done well but all the work's too far out, I don't have a car, a licence, I'm not even 18 to get your P's, so it's out of the question for me.



## Assistance

My dad, he's very old-fashioned and he said, 'Just get a job, a job's a job'. I said to him, 'Ba (I call him Ba because we're Italian), you got to enjoy a job you know and I can't do everything because I haven't got the education'. And he's like 'Nah, nah no, you go on, you learn.' They're very thick because they're very old-fashioned. But my mother's like, 'Find something that you like, but do it soon because you're going to be 18 next year, you're going to be an adult, they're probably not going to give you an apprenticeship at that time at 18, cos they like the young people, you know 16 and around there'. And my sister, she's just full on work and everything else. She finished high school. Now she does casual or part-time work catering. But in the family, there's not really no-one that points me out and talks to me about it.

Centrelink really didn't do much for me actually. I asked them straight out, 'I'd like a job if you can get me a job', that's all I wanted. They wanted to send me for courses and things like that, I don't like courses, honestly. I like to go in there, do my work, get some experience and learn it, you know straight into the job. And they said this, they said that. So I said all right I don't care. So I left there, they done nothing for me really. And family, half the time you can't rely on them, so I've actually had really no help from any of the places that I've gone to.

Centrelink put me through a course ages ago but I left there because they really pissed me off. I don't remember what it was called. It was like a tutoring place ... Every time I go to a place that helps you for work, they send you to a course, I do not like courses. I'm going to ask, 'Can you give me a job or not, can you put me in, can you tell me where to go and I'll go'. Because these courses, they take so long, they're confusing for me. I know they teach you there, but it's not my type of thing, I just like to go to the work, do my work, experience and learn.

## Learning difficulties

Maths for me is pretty difficult. Language, it's not too bad. English and all that, not too bad either. I haven't actually done it for about three or four years. My reading's OK, it's not good you know. I probably would need help with maths, it's a very big thing, algebra and all that stuff.

In the cabinet making it was a very big issue. And carpentry, at one stage with a tape measure because I did not have a clue how to use the thing, but one of the guys, he sat down with me, he was a really good bloke, he taught me how to use it patiently and I learned. And from there I wasn't working for a year, now I've lost everything, you forget, really. Plus when you're smoking, cigarettes, you lose brain cells, I'm telling you.

## Money

I haven't got Youth Allowance. I went to Centrelink a while ago and I tried to get an allowance, but they wouldn't give me it, because I didn't have enough points type of thing. They wanted a driver licence, birth certificate, school reports, all that type of stuff. I only had one school report because I didn't really care about it at the time. I had a bank card but they wanted more identification of myself and I didn't have enough so they wouldn't give it to me, so Centrelink has given me nothing. No dole, never.

My mother and father they always say to me, 'Would you like some money, would you like to go out?'. I say to them, 'No, no, no, you've worked, I want to stay home, I'll do whatever I need to do'. You know I can go for a walk, I've got the creek right here. I don't like to rely on other people, I like to rely on myself, I really do not like borrowing money because then you've got to pay it off and if you don't have money and you're in debt, or whatever, I just don't like it. So last time I went out was probably February this year, I don't remember actually, it was a mate's party – no it was in September, sorry, I had a mate's 20<sup>th</sup> and just went there and that was it really, the last time I went out. I'm not much of a party person, you know. I'd rather stay home and watch some movies with family and that's it, you know.

Honestly, if I had the money, enough of it, I'd buy a beautiful XYGT, that's my dream car. I haven't even got a licence but they're sooo beautiful, that's a dream. You never know it might happen, but I doubt it. That's about it really, I just don't really want nothing, I've got everything here, got the house, family.

### **The future**

I may have a job coming up in the next month. It's concreting, learning, or there's all different courses at this job site, it's a huge company ... This job is coming up, it's on the line, I don't know if I'll get it but I'm pretty sure I will because the foreman is going to put a word in for me, so I should be all right. There's concreting involved. He said to me, 'You could either do concreting or we could find you an apprenticeship or we could get you to go for a course and get your ticket as a dogman or a rigger or a crane driver or whatever'. So I said I'll look into it and if I enjoy it I'll go for it. So I'm just going to wait for this to come up, then hopefully I'll be starting work and I'll be all right.

A ticket, it's like a type of licence that you need, you go to TAFE I think, and you study, if it's crane driver, dogman, rigger whatever it is. So you do probably three days a week at TAFE every fortnight or something like that, I'm not sure what it is. You go to TAFE, you study it, then you go there, experience builds up and if the teachers at TAFE will pass you on the course then I guess you get those tickets, then your licence, and you start working for yourself or you can do what you want. I've actually never done it before, but I'm pretty interested in it and I really want to do it. If you haven't worked for one year straight you want to do anything you know, you just want to get in there.

In the next year or so, I'm going to be hoping I have a full-time job, I'm learning, as a rigger or as a dogman or whatever, I'm earning not too bad money, and just hope I'm in full-time work and I'm dedicated to it and I don't lose the job, that's it. That's my main thing now, getting stuck back into work and I don't care about going out, just going to work, work, work until I make enough and then you know that's it.

### **Advice for services to help young people**

If I was telling a service how to help young people who had left school, I'd tell them, well, there's a lot of us, my kind of people – I have to say 'my kind', because we've left school, we've had a lot of fights, we've had a lot of dramas, we've gone to a lot of different schools, you know at the end of the day it's not really all worth it ... I would say to the blokes that had just got out of school and need a job or something: 'Dedicate your job, like pick a job like bricklaying, carpenter, electrician, plumber whatever, a good trade, because in the future tradesmen are going to be very wanted, you know, they're going to be getting probably paid a lot, because there's not many left'. And so I'd say to the blokes or the guys, 'Dedicate a job, stick to it, work, finish your apprenticeship, then when you want you can start up your own business, make heaps. If you want to go out places, don't start any trouble or don't look for trouble or if there's trouble going on don't get involved, keep out of it, mind your own business'.

At school I sort of said to myself, 'What am I doing?, I'm hanging around with these guys, you think you're a big tough guy, but you're nothing, you're just a punk teen at school, a teenager'. And I said there's no use going to school, acting macho, starting fights, hurting people. You want to go to school, I regret it you know, if I could go back to school, which I don't wanna really, but it would be good to get some more education in me ... you go to school, you learn, you become something one day, that's why schools are there. I didn't do that, I had a lot of fights, had a lot of dramas with teachers, but if I could change it I would, don't worry. I'd go to school, I'd would never answer a teacher, I'd never swear, I'd never start a fight, I'd keep dedicated to the work I'd got to do at school.

## Brendan

### Background

*Brendan's parents separated before he started school, and he grew up with his mother as a sole parent, with continuing support from his father as a medium-income family.*

*At 6 he enjoyed school and was 'quite an academic'.*

*At 12 he was having a range of problems including asthma, headaches and attention difficulties. He said he wanted to be a mechanic.*

*At 15 he left school during Year 10 at a Catholic college. He had been unhappy at school and not doing well.*

*At 16 he was doing a pre-apprenticeship in mechanics.*

### May 2007 (age 16)

*The family had moved to an outer suburb. He had just finished a 6-month pre-apprenticeship at TAFE that week and was planning to get a part-time job, do VCE at TAFE the following year and then get an apprenticeship in mechanics.*

### Leaving school

I left school in the middle of the year, last year. I *hated* it there. I hated the kids. The kids were all snobs. And the teachers, they didn't really *listen* to what I was saying at all. They just couldn't be bothered. After a couple of years I thought about it and I just decided. It took a while to convince my parents. But they usually support me in every decision I make, so yeah they were OK with it.

After I left I did a five-week camp. It was just a place that didn't have any technology or anything. I heard about it through my school, my old school. When I came back from that camp I decided to do the pre-apprenticeship. I kind of already knew about it. It wasn't too bad. It was pretty simple, because it was just the basics of it all.

I'm thinking of going to try and get a part-time job. Coles or something, Target. I'd just put in my résumé and apply for them all. At the supermarket up the road. Try and get a job there. I haven't had a job, other than work experience at my dad's work. That was good.

I'm going to go back to get my VCE. Just do another course to get my VCE, at a different TAFE. I think I have to start it at the start of the year, next year. I'd hope to get my VCE thing. And start my apprenticeship.

My dad's got a business. So I was hoping I could one day take over that. I'd hope to do the apprenticeship somewhere else, but if I couldn't get it anywhere else, then I'd do it with him. My dad knows a lot of people. He'd probably help out. Or I could just look in the newspaper.

### November 2007 (age 17)

*Brendan had not yet got a job and was now hoping to go straight into an apprenticeship.*

### Since leaving school

When I left school, halfway through last year, I really wanted to leave. I had to convince Mum and Dad how much I hated it. I did, and they sent me to this camp. It's like a 'no-technology' camp. Real old school. For five weeks. There was a nine-day hike, that was pretty good. After that I just came back and then we moved at the end of the year in here. At the start of this year I did a TAFE course, pre-apprenticeship mechanics, and that finished during summer time. And I haven't done anything since.

## **The camp**

At first I didn't like it. It was like a group camp. It was pretty good I think. There was blacksmithing, woodwork stuff. Except we weren't allowed any technology, like no electronic stuff at all. Only really had lights in the main hall. We had to clean every day and chop wood, sweep up the main hall. We all had to sit down at the table for breakfast. It was really strict. You weren't allowed to stand up or reach across anyone or else you lost your breakfast. I did that for a couple of weeks. Then it came to the nine-day hike and I was just like 'Nuh', didn't want to do that. But it was good. I did enjoy it. We did walk, I forget how far, every day, but I think in total it was like 80 kilometres, with really big heavy backpacks on. We refuelled halfway through the hike and kept going. And that was that. Then we had a presentation, all the families came up and we demonstrated what we'd been doing and then I went home.

## **Moving location**

We moved here from the inner suburbs. Because I lived there my whole life it was weird. At first moving was like awesome, especially moving to a house with a pool. That was pretty much all that was on my mind. But now it's like, the area's too far out, away from everything. The other was such a convenient location to everything.

I don't see much of my friend lately. Before we moved, if I wanted to do something with him, I'd just catch the train a couple of stations up and we'd go do something or we'd go into the city. But now, to get to his place I have to get a bus, go up to get another bus and then another bus to get to the station to get the train, walk a kilometre to get to his place. It's a bit much. I've moved away from most of my friends. For the ones I was already far away, I'm still far away. Lately they are busy with school. They've got exams and stuff. My friend is Year 9 this year. My other mate is Year 10. And all my other ones from school are Year 11.

## **Training: the pre-apprenticeship**

I liked it because I was doing what I enjoy doing, pulling apart stuff and putting it back together. Except for my teacher, he was an idiot, he kept telling stories that no-one wanted to hear, and then when we actually got work done it was like, 'Oh, you're going too fast for me'. That went for six months, and it was fun. I wasn't too thrilled about going, cos I was frightened I was going to get stabbed or something. But the kids were pretty nice. But that's just me, I'm paranoid about everything. I didn't learn heaps, but I learnt pretty much the basics. I'm not sure what you need to learn going into an apprenticeship. At the end they just helped us do résumés and made us look in the paper or something, for jobs. They had classes dedicated to learning that stuff. Going into interviews, the proper way to go for an interview, dress nice and be polite and stuff like that.

## **Looking for work**

I've been trying to get a job at Coles, just up there. Just for like night-time work. My brother's mate works night-time shift and he says the money's good, so I thought I'd give it a go. You had to create an account at Coles Myer online. Fill in forms. They sent me an email saying there should be no problem getting a job. But haven't sent anything since then. That's the only one I've tried for.

## **The apprenticeship**

I only realised the other day that I was allowed to start my apprenticeship. I was supposed to still be doing the course next year, the VCE one, but Mum decided, 'No, you don't need that...' I might get sick of it if I did it. Sick of the whole apprentice thing. It was Mum's idea. Because that pre-apprenticeship ... we thought, before doing it, that was supposed to be the course that got my VCE. And it was supposed to take a bit off my apprenticeship, but it wasn't. It was the wrong course.

There are jobs for mechanics. I know that one for sure. Apparently they're having trouble hiring. It's really the only one I know. Pretty much what I'm going for. I want to do stuff I enjoy, like

mechanics. I just like hands-on stuff. I never really liked bookwork. But my dad, he runs a mechanic business and I've been interested in all his bookwork. All the payments and stuff. That stuff I'm interested, but not like other bookwork, like schoolwork. But hands-on stuff, it's just fun, fun to do. I know with my apprenticeship there's going to be schoolwork involved. But that's as far as I want to go with that. I don't want to do any more schoolwork than that.

The apprenticeship would be just like being a mechanic. Get up early, go all the way down by car. One week every month I'd have to do a week at school. That's the only part I'm not looking forward to. Yeah, should be good. And I'd be getting paid for working which hasn't really happened. It's crap wages – I don't know, I think first-year apprentice is like \$250 a week. Not good. But since I'm living at home it doesn't really matter. I want to get somewhere close. Hopefully I'll have a car. I think it would be better if I could get a car before I did my apprenticeship, just for getting around.

### **Assistance**

I'm all right, pretty well with all that stuff. Like Mum and Dad. They're just supportive, in everything. My friends, not really. I don't really talk to them much. They are at school.

My dad, he hasn't done anything yet, but he's going to. Because he's a mechanic he knows a lot of people and he's trying to get an apprenticeship. Well we've only just decided I'm doing it, so I haven't really needed help yet. I could do the apprenticeship with Dad, but Dad doesn't want me doing it there. He thinks like a dealership, Holden dealership maybe, because they've got all the technology. He doesn't have all that stuff. It's fine.

There was a career adviser at TAFE. I only had one session with her. I didn't really use it that much. It was just about my résumé.

### **Money**

I tried applying for Youth Allowance. But by the time we figured that one out, the course was over. Dad gives me \$100 a week. I have enough. I never leave the house, hardly. I just keep it. I go out sometimes, but when I do I just spend it all. But when I go out, I've got heaps of it. Are things hard to afford? Other than computer games, no.

### **The future**

The next year or two? Do my apprenticeship. Maybe just get a job up at Coles, just to earn a bit of money so I can get a car, because I'll be needing that for my apprenticeship.

### **Advice for services to help young people**

I don't know. Like for someone who's not well off or something? I don't know, I'm not in that situation. I suppose if you can find their interests and work on that.

## Duc

### Background

*Duc's Vietnamese parents had separated when he was young and he had had quite a disrupted childhood with many moves of school. His mother was on a low income but his father's income was higher.*

*At 6 he was living with his mother, had already moved school twice and had missed school because of her ill health and housing instability.*

*At 12 he was living with his father and stepmother who were both working. He wanted to be a doctor or a pilot.*

*At 14 he moved to live with his mother interstate and did Year 9 there.*

*At 15 he started Year 10 but during the year he left school. He gave a number of reasons for leaving school, including trouble at home with his stepfather who had a grudge against him; his mother having moved house so it was hard to get to school; also he slacked off at school because the work was easy and he used to wag school a lot.*

*By 16 he had left his mother's home and lived on a farm with his brother for a few months doing nothing.*

### June 2007 (age 16)

*In April 2007 Duc returned to live with his father in Melbourne and went back to school in Year 10, about six weeks prior to this interview.*

### Return to school

It's going pretty well. I'm doing my work experience this week though, at the local library. I'll work from 10 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon. Each day we get paid \$5, that's for everybody. That's for two weeks. I haven't started yet cos I just got my work placement today. I start tomorrow. School's not as bad, just about everyone's different. But old friends have become enemies. I have new friends already. For history I'm going pretty well, but for maths I'm a bit behind, I missed half of first term. Next term I'll try harder with maths. My dad can help. The work is much harder down here. No-one gives me extra help.

At home I'm just having problems with my stepmum now. It's just family issues probably, she likes to have a go at my brother and I. Now my brother is moving back to interstate.

I'm trying to get part-time work, anything, just part-time work to make a bit of money. I've actually looked around, I've applied for McDonalds and all that, but most of the places have already been taken up.

I'm just trying to complete school. My dad's told me if I can get into uni he's going to pay for me. I'm pretty happy about that. I'm planning on becoming a lawyer or something, cos during the time I was up on the farm I was just reading about psychiatry, learning how to get into people's head and all that. For a lawyer, it helps if you know what the other guy is going to think.

### November 2007 (almost 17)

*Duc had just finished his Year 10 exams and felt he had done well. He wanted to finish school and do law.*

### Since leaving school

I left school, that was because over there [interstate] the schoolwork is much more easier, it was a repeat of the previous year that I'd already done in Melbourne. When I went into class it was boring. The students there found it hard, the work, but I sat there and I finished it within 10 minutes

of the work set up which was supposed to be for 45 minutes. Then I just got bored, so I started skipping school which led me to not go on with school at all. And then my mum moved out to the farm, I'm not sure why. I started to go to school up there for like a week, and then I got bored again. And then I moved in with my brother out in the country. There all we did was just muck around. My brother did farming and my mum had a farm at her house which she rented off a landowner and then after that I don't know. Just between those days we were playing around, that's all we did. We had an argument with my mum and then we didn't talk for a while now, it's been like six months. And then my dad picked us up and we came down here to Melbourne, and then I went back to school.

We didn't really do much between, I was just wasting my time. The period when I'm not at school I started realising how much more forgetful I was of my previous work I used to do. Like when I started doing maths again, I thought whoa, I used to be able to do this easy and now it's so much harder. But now that I'm back down in Melbourne I just got back into the habit of studying again, so my brain is starting to think again.

Up to now I just learnt about street life and all that. I didn't live in the streets but I knew heaps of people who have, so I learned most of the stuff I wouldn't have learned down here. In a way I was still learning things even without going to school. And that's pretty much all I can think of. It was pretty boring. There was nothing much to talk about.

### **School was boring**

I did Year 8 maths down in Melbourne and I went up there [interstate] I was doing Year 7 maths. That way the work was a lot more easier. I barely concentrated, I barely used the powers of concentration to do my work. My mum didn't really have time to talk over what I was doing at school, so it was just by myself and all that. In a way I was more independent with my schooling work up there.

When I was skipping school nothing happened. They didn't call or anything, they called once in a while, they called just to check why I was not at school and then after that they stopped. My mum didn't have a choice. She was busy herself, trying to run the takeaway shop which was getting pretty bad business cos there was too much competition in the same food court. And then paying off debts and all that, so I didn't really want to annoy her. My mum was still friendly to me but she just had less time.

### **Moving to the farm and leaving school**

Because the lease had run out on the house she was renting, my mum had to find a house within a week or so. We had no choice but to move in with one of my mum's friends that had a house up on a farm, so it was pretty big. We only stayed there for a week until her friend bought a house which was big enough for two families, so we started living there and from there I went to school. And then when I went for a week I just decided, I don't know, I thought it was just a waste of time, I didn't really learn anything. Then I just started staying at home, going out every day, wasting time, that's all and then I don't know. I had an argument with my stepdad, not for school, just for going out, so I moved out with my brother and from there just mucked around again. After that we just didn't do much. The family was already split and all that and couldn't help.

My brother had his Centrelink, also he was looking for work. I'm not sure how that thing works, but he was able to pay the rent and all that. And my mum had a farm at the back and she used to make dinner and bring it over, cos there was a shed at the back of that house, a pretty big one with a kitchen and she used to cook stuff and we'd just go up there and eat, so that way we really saved some money, just for the rent and that's all. We learned about hell, because 40 degrees in a house in the middle of the country, no air-conditioning, it was hot. Couldn't open the windows because there were mozzies outside, we were pretty much stuck in an oven.

Me and my brother were really stuck on the farm, we were trying to move out because that lady started ripping us off. The landlord started ripping us off \$600 a week for a house, a pretty broken-down house as well. We're not sure why because she was charging us \$100 a week which was reasonable, electricity and all that and then she was like you have to start paying for the electricity bill and she'd say, 'I'll round a sum of 600 a week'. Me and my brother was able to do it for two weeks until we just ran out of money, we didn't have it. So then she started calling up her son and threatening us and all that, him bringing up his friends. Then we got robbed which was pretty bad, and then when we were back in Melbourne we found out it was her son that did it. My brother had a pretty nice set of games, computers, TV (a really big flat one) and it got stolen. We really couldn't say anything to the police cos we had no proof that it was him, even though we found out. We'd called the police before, but they had no way of finding it. It was really annoying.

Then near March this year, my dad called down and he goes, 'I can pick you both up', and he made a decision. If my dad hadn't been able to call down, we would probably have been stuck on the streets or something. He just chanced that he just called down. It was lucky. Probably because it was my brother's birthday as well. He came down the next day and picked us up.

Before we went back to Melbourne, that same night we saw my mum and she went 'See you' and all that, and that's the last I've seen her. I was supposed to see her again when I came down to Melbourne but she never came. So it's pretty weird. I haven't seen my mum in a while and I haven't been able to contact her for six months so I'm pretty sad about that ... She's with my stepdad. I don't know, sometime in these holidays I'm going to try and get her number and try and keep contacting her.

Learning about street life? Drugs, alcohol, fighting, gangs, that's all, pretty much the basics. You just learn about everything, like what groups to not hang round with, what to do, what not to do, where to go, where not to go. What to say, what not to say and all that. Like there's a gang, they're a bunch of Cambodese background, Cambodian. The Vietnamese people don't actually go anywhere near them, they are known for bashing. But when I got there I never went into any gangs or any violence, I didn't take any alcohol or drugs. I just learnt, I never experienced it.

### **Previous work experience**

Before I left school I worked at Hungry Jacks and I worked for my mum part-time, takeaway. [At] Hungry Jacks I prepared and did counter work as well. I'm not sure what you call it, like bench, making the burgers and all that as well. My friend was already working there so I decided to apply there. I was working about half a year. I just got too lazy I think, cos my friend moved to a different Hungry Jacks and I was like, 'I'm not working there if I'm all by myself'.

When I was working for my mum I just did the cash register, that's all I did. I didn't really get paid. I was just working for fun, something to do on Fridays. Whenever I had time, probably for a year, every Friday. Asian food, takeaway, like fried rice and all of that. I can cut vegies, meat and all of that. I didn't get paid, I was just helping out more.

### **Looking for work**

I'm currently, sometime this week, putting in a résumé for Subways, because my dad has already talked to the employer and he says yes that is fine if I put in a résumé, so I might be working again soon. For the holidays only though. That way I have money to spend. I've just been trying to finish Year 10.

I've applied for heaps of jobs, well a few – I did Safeway's, McDonalds, pretty much those two – and I'm doing Subways. Safeway's I had the biggest muck-up, cos I was supposed to go for an interview and they gave me the address but there were three shops at the one address and when I went to one they said, 'No not this one go to the other one', and when I went to the other one they go, 'Yeah you are at the right place', but when they checked it out they went, 'We don't have you



on our list' and then they gave me the real address which was somewhere else and then I didn't get the job cos I couldn't be bothered doing any more.

Employers want a good worker, not lazy. Actually I haven't been lazy down there. They want you confident, experienced, happy. I'm suited to more IT, I'm better with the computer than talking and all that.

### **Work experience**

I worked at the local library. They just told me if I ever wanted to work here just learn more about librarian and they would let me apply, cos I worked there ... It was boring stacking books. I don't mind working with the kids and all that, but since I was working there I wasn't allowed to talk or anything. The only people you could talk to were other librarians, I couldn't communicate with other kids, or even the other teenage worker who was already there. They go I was mature for my age. They didn't like that I had the philosophy in my head 'better seen, not heard' – that was more me, because I didn't talk much and I got into trouble for that, not talking to the librarians. I didn't really want to talk to the staff, because I didn't really know what they were talking about, they were talking about socialising at home and all that. I was like, 'OK I'm just going to finish my work and go'.

### **Family and friends**

My stepmum used to be a lot nicer to me and then she started being really mean and all that. So we started hating her. She is just annoying me now. Like when your morale is high she likes to make mine go down, she is always saying how bad I am, how lazy I am, when I actually help around the house a lot. She is constantly complaining. Because she has a baby and if that baby is annoying her that day she uses me as a stress reliever; and I've already told my dad, and he goes he can't help, it's her. I just run down to my computer and turn on the music really loud with my earphones. Sometimes my dad's in a bad mood and they both go off at me. That happened once and I went to a friend's house for the weekend and then came back before school. It was better than me going off at them as well. I'd rather walk away than start an argument.

I always socialise. I was going out with friends yesterday. My dad didn't know that. He didn't know I was going out yesterday. I've got friends, some are annoying, you get used to it. From school.

### **School now and career planning**

As long as I can put my mind to it I can do the work. Currently I'm the highest scoring student in psychology. I'm happy with that. In English I'm one of the best students as well and also in commerce as well. Next year I'll be doing psychology, philosophy, legal studies, IT, science and maths. I'm not sure but I think philosophy and psychology mixed with English and legal studies would be pretty good for a lawyer base thing. We've already got the pamphlets for the uni, just checking what courses are required. Most of them is mainly English and psychology so I'll be fine with that. Maths I was doing really really crap and I still am, but I can catch up during this holiday. I think it was depending on the subject we were learning in maths, like I missed out two years of maths so I had to do quadratics, I was like 'What is this?', I'd just see letters and numbers, that's all I'd see. Then when I was at home I started studying again and this semester's maths I got higher scores so I'm happy with that. In the exam I blasted through it easy. All the exams I finished half an hour early because I already knew all the answers and stuff.

There's also a program on the school intranet that teaches us what courses and what subjects. I'm just looking at what might be required for that course ... I'm focusing on the subjects I'm good at like psychology and all that. It still gives me a really good career in the future if I'm able to do it. We have career counsellors but I haven't really talked to them. I wasn't thinking about leaving school and doing TAFE or anything.

## **Assistance**

My dad is encouraging me, he goes if I get into uni he will give me a car, he will pay for my uni fees. My friends are all aiming to finish university and all that as well. It's more of a challenge to compete against them and try to beat them as well, it makes me have a little motivation to do it. We have a careers teacher and we've also got those books that I mentioned and we also have got JobSearch. There's career teachers at school but I really don't need to talk to them. I mainly study psychology to learn how to fix myself as well, cos I've seen how psychologists work with children so I try to blend that in with myself and see how I would be able to motivate myself to do better. It's better. I'm not slack any more. Like in the morning my dad was like 'Do the garden' and I was thinking how hot is it, but I ended up doing it. Cos that way I don't get an argument. I don't really need help planning the future, I've really got enough motivation and all that.

## **Centrelink**

I've been to Centrelink, with my dad, my brother and my mum, all separate times. I can't get Youth Allowance because of my dad's income, it's too high. I could get it when I was living with my mum and then it just got cut off for some reason, I'm not sure why. I think we didn't go to the meeting or something, the interviews ... I had to apply for Youth Allowance at 16 and I wasn't allowed that either because they go I didn't have a reasonable enough excuse for it. It was something to do with the parents or something. When I was with my brother it didn't work out either. We tried to do that because he needed help paying the rent either way. So I was going to apply for Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance, but when I went to the interview she just said I didn't have a reasonable enough excuse, I'm not sure why. She goes that there were other teenagers that had a worse reason, had a better reason to apply for Youth Allowance.

Centrelink, my interview was booked, I went there, it took me a while, then five minutes and the interview was done, cos that lady was in a rush for some reason and she wanted to go and socialise as well because she kept getting calls from her friends. And then when she declined the thing for Youth Allowance and all that, it was bad.

When me and my brother were living on the farm, it took us at least an hour or two hours to be able to get to the closest Centrelink, and my brother's car broke down and she kept asking us for an interview, some week and all that and it was hard just to get there. And sometimes when I got there she went no I can't have an interview today, which meant I wasted two hours of walking. I had to walk there, because in the country everything is a long way. It was in a country town.

The 1800 Kids Helpline, I didn't really use that. It didn't help. I only talked for about a second and then I hanged up, cos my mobile phone was low battery. I tried it cos we were stuck on the farm and we wanted to move and cos the lady didn't allow me to get Youth Allowance it was hard to be able to find a good place, so I started calling around, trying to find some help. The lady at Centrelink just sent me about the rent and all that stuff, cos the lease that the landlord said \$600 was unfair and my brother was trying to get a case against her because we had already paid \$1200 to her and if we'd been able to get a case and lawyer we would have been able to sue her. The lady from Centrelink gave us the number to Legal Aid and all that.

## **Money**

My dad gives me 20 bucks every week for pocket money. That's the only money I get now. It's not really enough. But I just save. I don't really need much stuff. I don't have any wants, so I'm fine without. Even with my mum, I found like having little money I learned to pull back on some stuff, so it was really helpful when I came down here. School costs, my dad pays for that, uniform and all that. That's all I really need to do my schooling and all that.

## The future

My future? Finish my schooling, studying, uni and work. [*Aged 11 Duc said he wanted to be a doctor or a pilot and now at 17 he wanted to do law.*] Lawyer or doctor, either way, those two I want. Just the family itself that's changed my ideas. Recently my uncle has had a work accident and he wasn't like sure enough to go to the lawyers and all that, so I want to be a lawyer so I can help people like him cos I can talk to other Vietnamese people. I don't really want them to have to suffer because of their language barrier. So I want to learn about law, because getting robbed and all that, you really want to be able to make so that the victims don't have to suffer as much.

## Advice for services to help young people

You need to be able to get a person that's a good listener, they've actually lived that kind of life before. If I had to interview someone else who was just like me, I'd be able to understand them much more. Cos in a way it's hard for me to explain my life to you. I'm at just an age and all that, and sometimes kids act differently to people of different ages. Just listening and all that, just basic communication skills as well.

Like youth services, I've just heard about those. Like the 1800 Kids Helpline. I think it should help some kids. It's a good place to be able to talk to.

Centrelink? Unless you are really good liar and you're really dramatic, then they're really no help. I know some teens up there would probably make any excuse to be able to get Youth Allowance so they could spend it every week, when teens like me [that] were stuck on a farm and had no money weren't able to get it. So I don't really trust Centrelink enough. I know it helps some workers and all that, for kids it doesn't help at all. It could be made more helpful, it needs to be more helpful for kids. I reckon the interviews should be made at home or something. Cos, depending on the teen, it's really hard for him or her to be able to get there.

Schools? They could have modified the work a bit. I know it's a problem for just one student, but without the student the school's really nothing. I know it would have been annoying just to change work just for me, but it's better than me going skipping school for no reason.

Services talking to parents? No, depending on the parents. My stepmum, she tells everyone out of the house that it's me that's the one that is bad, not her. So what happens if the interviewer came and talked to her and got her side of the story and believed her more than me? So it would have been just a waste of time talking to me. Looking for jobs and things like that, then go and see the parents. Not about the problems at home at all.

## Andy

### Background

*Andy's family has always had a low income. His father was unemployed, his parents separated before he started school and he grew up with his mother as a sole parent. His father was Aboriginal and died when he was young.*

*At 6 he had started school but was missing days because of health problems.*

*At age 12 his health was good and he was doing well at school and was in an accelerated class.*

*His mother described him as easygoing and enthusiastic.*

*At age 15, he disliked school, was in conflict with some teachers and was truanting often, although the school described him as a capable student. He wanted to do engineering or IT.*

*He left school aged 16 in the middle of Year 11 after conflict with the principal. By the end of the year (2006) he had worked for a couple of months in a computer factory but left that job (because of low pay and travel). He was planning to do a computer certificate course at TAFE.*

### June 2007 (age 17)

*Andy was living with his mother and had been waiting to enrol in a TAFE course for some months.*

I'm just waiting until next week and then enrolling myself into a TAFE course, IT. There's two choices: there's part-time and full-time. You can complete in a six-month course if you do it full time, which would be about four or five days a week. And you can complete it in 12 months if you do it two or three days part time. I like to do things in bursts, so I'd probably like to do it in six months and just get it over and done with ... say over a year, to complete one course, it'd probably get boring stretched out too long.

I just hunted the course down ... basically I found out when I was in school that what we were doing in computer class was equivalent to Information Technology Certificate I and II. And I thought well there must be III, IV and whatever else. So I chased that up on TAFE and found out that it does, it progresses into III, IV and then you pick what else you want because you've got those certificates. It's called natural progression, after you've completed Certificate III, it progresses into IV and then if you imagine a tree branch it opens up with some new certificates you can try and apply for ... once you've reached level IV you can branch out, into a speciality of IT. Say, design, programming or web design or something like that.

I'm not quite sure of the costs at the moment. I've never been to TAFE before. I'm pretty sure you get one course free and I've also talked to someone at TAFE who said something about Aboriginals and Indigenous people being not being charged for some courses. So I'll track that down when I find out if that's the case.

### Leaving school

The main reason ... there were a number of contributing factors. I guess it was partly to do with my own laziness, but a bit of harassment at school from my teachers, the principal. He was just hassling me, giving me a hard time, pulling me out of class for unknown reasons. He'd stop me in the playground and want to check up on me and ... he had nothing, no reason whatsoever, no suspicion or anything, just because he'd like to pull me out in front of my friends to make an example of me. I thought it was a bit of prejudice, or discrimination. I don't know what you'd call it.

My mum's attitude? Annoyance, with despair. A clash of emotions. On the one hand she knew that the principal was being really harsh on me but at the same time she knew I shouldn't be leaving school.

I have contemplated the idea of going back to school, but I've sort of snapped out of the school life mode, if you know what I mean. I just find those kids really ridiculous, most of them are just there

to waste time to get on a basic level. I'd rather go to something like TAFE and push into a class who are just trying to get their certificate. You know what I mean, they've got more of a focus. I just think if I went back to school I'd be doing a bunch of subjects that really wouldn't be relevant to what I'm chasing.

The school I'm closest to still has that nasty teacher there, the principal there, so I don't think I really want to go back to that school and I don't think he'd want me to go back there either. Our mind spaces just clash.

### **Work experience: the computer factory**

Basically when I left school I sat around for a couple of weeks, maybe even a month. And then I got a job putting together computers for about a month and a half. When I got hired for the interview, the guy said it will be a bit hands-on, but a lot of it will just be doing filing and answering phones. So I took it as an administration job, but he was making me work downstairs doing all this computer building and I was working with much older people who had experience and they were getting paid much, much more than I was and he was just paying me for the administration wage. So that was a bit jibbing and I didn't quite like that. So it was within the trial period, so I just left, but it wasn't a very good idea, cos I should have followed the rule where you get another job before you leave your current one. And I didn't, so I haven't been employed since.

I think Mum found the job in the paper. And she just mentioned it to me, 'You should really apply for this'. So I wrote a quick covering letter explaining my situation and I attached my résumé to it and it was the first proper full application that I actually spent time on. Compared to a Centrelink application where I just send my email and my job seeker ID number and I just go, 'Yeah, send', but this one I actually just sat down and properly applied for and within two hours they actually rang me back and said 'Could we have an interview with you?'. And I said 'When?' and they said 'Tomorrow'. And I said 'Wow, definitely'.

Travel was another factor of me leaving the job, you see. I accepted the job but it was in a big, hilly industrial area, just out in the middle of nowhere. I'd have to get up at six, the job would start at nine. I'd get up at six, catch a six-thirty train, then I'd have to get a bus into the industrial estate of where I'd work. And from when I'd get there, I'd have to walk another five minutes to where I'd work, in the middle of just bush and industrial sort of buildings and stuff. And then I'd have to sit out the front because I'd get there at about eight and I'd have to sit there about an hour or an hour and fifteen, just in the cold. Because they didn't trust me enough to give me keys to get in there. So I'd just have to sit out in the cold and wait for them to rock up. Because I didn't have a car and there was no way of getting another bus, say a later bus or something, because there was only one bus that ran through there once a day, twice a day. One in there and one on the way back in the afternoon. And I'd always miss the late one because I'd finish at five and the last one would be at four-thirty or something. I knocked off at five so the only way I could really get to any train station to get myself home was to scab a lift or walk through the bush at night and that was a bit creepy.

### **Employment assistance**

I've had on-and-off [Job Network] employment, doing courses, not really courses, but Activity Agreements, so they make you sit there in classes with unemployed people and you have to just learn to write a covering letter, find advantage points in interviews and do all that tactical stuff in jobs ... job seeking, presentation really. How to set out a résumé, covering letter all that sort of stuff. And then they make you sit there for about two hours searching jobs, ten jobs a day, which sort of seemed a bit silly for the fact that if you were really trying for a job, there wasn't going to be that many jobs. But it was compulsory, so if you wanted to be a draughtsman you'd have to find ten draughtsman jobs.

They just said to you use any sort of media to gain employment, you can use newspapers, ring up places as long as you jot down who you rang up and who you spoke to and days and stuff. As long as they can verify somehow that you had asked for a job from someone.

I ended up just finding myself sitting there in a class full of people who didn't really want jobs, they just wanted to play this time out until they get back on to their Centrelink course. And so they didn't help very much, didn't work, and then once you got into job seeking part, unless you had someone sitting next to you giving you full advice, there weren't very many places they would give you to look for. And again, getting ten jobs, it's annoying. You can apply for places that are just completely out of the way, like two or three hours away so you know they won't ring you back, there's no point. It's a strategy used by many people. You apply to places so far away you know they won't ring you back. But it still counts on the application.

I get Youth Allowance, partly that, mixed with CDEP employment.

### **The future**

The next year or two? Hopefully just get myself a nice little part-time job locally. Something that pays a bit more money than Centrelink. And yeah, just finish up TAFE. I've no intention of just changing halfway through.

You learn quick when you're young with computers. A lot of parents say, 'Oh no, this is an adult's tool, you can't use this'. But what they don't realise is that a kid's brain is like a sponge at that time. If you give a kid a computer, within half an hour he'd be using it better than you would.

### **December 2007 (age 17)**

*Having found the IT course he started at TAFE too specific (technical support), Andy was now undertaking a 6-month Green Corps training program.*

### **Since leaving school**

I was halfway through Year 11 and I just skipped school a bit doing stuff and the principal just didn't like me. We didn't get along, so it got to a point where he started pulling me out of classes and stuff, so I didn't like it so I decided to leave. And I start looking for work, or a TAFE course or something, and I started working for a computer company and they built high tech computers for industrial companies; and the guy there he was an old bloke who used to work for the navy and he would pay me for an administration wage but he would get me to do technician stuff so I would be missing out of probably about 30 bucks of wages. So I left that job too because he was underpaying me.

Then I looked into TAFE courses and was finding out about what I could do at TAFE and all that sort of stuff and I thought I'd give Information Technology Certificate III a try, seeing I did computer studies in Year 9 and 10 at school. And so I started that it would have been around July this year or August and I didn't like that. It turned out very boring and just not something I wanted to do at this point in time, so I left that and started to do Green Corps.

### **Training: IT TAFE course**

Learning tech support wasn't really the funnest thing ever. People don't really consider how much effort you have to put in to help someone over the phone, especially when you don't have their problem right in front of you in the same exact form that they're dealing with at that time. You have to do it on a phone line 50 kilometres away, so it's very hard to decipher what's going on with their computer if they are very panicky and getting aggressive or annoyed and they've already tried for hours to fix the computer with no avail and you're sitting there as their last resort and they're starting to get frustrated and yell at you. To me it's not the sort of industry I want to get into. It's too stressy. It was training but it was what I was going straight into pretty much as soon as I finished the course.

The majority of the people, because they were working in IT, were just ... they sound arrogant. People in IT can be very arrogant sometimes. Some of the people can be really nice but a lot of the people are socially inept with IT and they're super smart but they're not the best people to talk to one on one. Basically I still like IT. There's so many areas of IT, but the area I got into at TAFE was too specifically into tech support.

## **Green Corps**

Green Corps is a government initiative set up to help people, I don't know, get their feet down somewhere where they can feel comfortable doing something like a bit of bush regeneration work, fixing tracks, pulling weeds out. Basically like landscaping but for bush tracks and stuff, fix up areas that have become downtrodden over the years, with erosion and people just coming and going and leaving stuff and rubbish and all that sort of jazz everywhere. So we come along and we clean it all up and we make it look fresh again. Basically every day we try to get outdoors, like the whole day. It's pretty much a 40-hour week and about 35 hours we're outside.

A friend introduced me to Green Corps, someone who is doing it with me. He just left his job at Hungry Jacks and his parents suggested it to him and he suggested it to me. I have to travel about an hour every day to and from work, but it's not too bad, it's only one train there and one train back so it's all right, or one train there and two trains back but it's fine, I don't mind that. I'm currently doing Green Corps at the moment and I like it, it's good.

We get paid about \$260, \$270 a week. It works out all right, I think that's a little bit better than first year apprenticeship wages, but it's only a 6-month course. Afterwards it would definitely be best to get at least one or two of us from the actual course into something to do with bush regeneration or something like that, something to do with land care and plants.

After this I wouldn't mind working in a nursery or something. I liked working at the nursery. We work in a nursery once a week to cover some sort of crash area. We get a Certificate 1 or 2 in land management and conservation after we finish Green Corps. So that's like another thing we can add to our portfolio. I enjoy working at the nursery, it's quite fun. We go on seed collection and propagation and stuff like that. We go and collect seeds and then wait for a few weeks and pick them all out and go and plant them as seedlings and grow them in greenhouses. It's fun. It seems more rewarding – you get to see a physical outcome at the end of the day, you get to see what you've actually physically done, you've pulled out like 100 metres of weeds in a day – than to sit there in front of a blank screen all day.

## **Assistance**

People can be helpful, networking. I guess I wouldn't have got this job unless I knew that kid. My mum's very helpful too. She finds things for me and if I ever get muddled up and don't know what to say to someone over the phone, she'll always suss it out for me and help me through that stuff, so she's great like that.

Employment services, no. They're a bit 'We'll help you, but only because we're getting a cut for ourselves' sort of ethic that I see them having. My experiences with them is not very helpful. They can be helpful but only on a very minimum basis. They'll barely help you scrape through because they don't really care if you get a job or not, they just want to know if you can get their numbers down so they can get paid. You feel like a number when you work with them, you don't feel like a person.

My last contact with [Job Network provider] was probably a month ago, two months ago, they keep sending me surveys asking me how their service was. It's terrible and I keep forgetting to send them back to them.

## **Money**

I get about \$270 a week, before tax, so probably \$250, \$260 maybe. At the moment, because I live at home with my parents, it's easy on the money I have. But if I were to move out by myself or even with someone else it would still be very hard. Rents are so steep. For one cabin it's \$150 a week, \$160 – like 300 bucks, more than half of my fortnightly pay. Then on top of that I have to have electricity, water, which I know you only have to pay them quarterly, but it still adds up.

## **The future**

I think I'm all right for now. I don't really know where I'm going. But that's not exactly a bad thing. I don't really know at the moment, but I'm sure as options open up to me I'll make good decisions now. In two or three years time? I honestly don't know. Hopefully I'm still around.

## **Advice for services to help young people**

I'd just say, 'Stay at school'. Because you don't realise how many social connections you have at school and your life is pretty much built on who you know and what your relationship is with these people, and as you grow older you realise that your friends become more useful in what they can do, in their type of workplace or whatever they do. So people are useful as they grow older. And if you drop out early at school you just forget and get forgotten about, whereas people who build up friendships within the school, because school's not just about learning school stuff it's also a social thing where you learn your grounds and you find your friends and enemies for the rest of your life. I mean, a lot of people who stay in the same town their whole life have the same friends and enemies their whole lives. But I guess I'd just say, 'Stay at school'. Cos it's not really that long. I wish I had finished it. Yeah it's good to, because you just don't know what you've got until you've left it really. But I'm not interested in going back. I figure I've got all I can for me out of the school system that I could. It could be more, but it would be a whole new chapter.



## Maddie

### Background

*Maddie lived with her sole parent mother in her early years which were disrupted by health and housing problems. After her mother died, she lived with relatives and then with her father as a sole parent.*

*At 6 she was living with an aunt and was described as withdrawn.*

*At 12 she was living with her father. She wanted to be a lawyer when she grew up.*

*At 15 in Year 9 she had run away from home and had missed a lot of school. She returned home and at the end of the year was struggling to catch up. She finally left school in August 2006 during Year 10 aged 16. Again she left home but returned.*

### May 2007 (age 17)

*In early 2007 Maddie commenced doing a VCAL course at TAFE.*

### Leaving school

I wouldn't have a clue when I first left. Last time I left was August last year. They kicked me out. Just too many absences, stuff like that. Dad just told me to look for work, or go back to school. Not to just stay at home and do nothing.

### VCAL

VCAL, I'm doing normal subjects: English, maths, stuff like that, Year 11. I'll do Year 11 for now. I finish school at the end of the year. And I can go on to another course and figure out what I want to do. Or I can do my Year 12. I haven't realised yet what I want to do. So if there's anything like traineeships then I'll probably do that.

My worker at TAFE, they know what I'm looking for and stuff like that. So I've got a lot of help there and they help me out with court and dentist and everything so it's really good. I've got lots of help there.

### Looking for work

I am looking for work at the moment, anything really. Like a video shop or something. I've got my résumés and all that ready. Like my résumés are done. And I've already tried VideoEzy but I'm actually waiting ... My dad just sent me a message now actually. I'm going to get a new phone, so I've got to change my mobile number on the résumé, then I'm going to start looking again.

It shouldn't be too hard to find a job. I'd just go in there and say have they got any work available. I've got the hours that I can work so that it doesn't interfere with school with anything. Like whatever I want to do I'd put a résumé in, but if I haven't got any calls back then I guess I'll look on the net or go to JobSearch. It's just on the internet, JobSearch. It's got available jobs and that.

Actually I was going to do this traineeship but it was only if you've got New Zealand or Island background or something. And I don't have that. But it was for an office administration/receptionist. It was a traineeship and that's like what I want to do – reception. Office work and that. I did a bit of that with my sister when I did work experience. It was good.

### November 2007 (age 17)

*Maddie had just finished her VCAL certificate course at TAFE. She hoped to get an office traineeship next year.*

## Leaving school

When I left school last year, I was on the Centrelink payments for a while, just looking for work. And then I started working at McDonalds. I lasted there about four months, I hated it so I quit. And then Centrelink told me I can't just be doing nothing, and I thought no, I want to study, I want to do my VCE. So Centrelink got me on to this TAFE. They actually gave me a few options of different TAFE I could go to, they said it's actually a lot easier than school, high school, you know. It was to do VCAL, it's like VCE, like an alternative. So I started going to this TAFE in February this year. And I just got my certificate for that two days ago. So I'm finished that, now I've got my VCAL. And next year I'm looking to do an office admin traineeship.

Other than that, I've been having problems with my boyfriend. I've got to get a restraining order on him, but other than that I don't have any big problems, I'm just happy I've done all my school.

A lot changed with my family, especially my dad. He was pretty pissed off ... He's the type [who thinks] I've got to be doing something in my life. He won't let me just sleep in, and bum around the house. I'm not allowed to do stuff like that. So we weren't really getting along too well. But he's really proud of me now, because I've done something, I've accomplished something. So things are a lot better at home as well. And yeah, I just can't wait until I'm out in the workforce.

## Work experience

I did work experience at my sister's work, she works at a recruitment agency. I did that for two weeks. And I was actually living at her house at the time for two weeks and I had to get up at five every morning. And from her house, because she lives in the country, it was like an hour and something drive. I really liked it, you know. I liked it so that's what I want to do, I was doing reception. I pretty much learnt everything that all the other workers knew there: put people on the system, appointments, answering phones and all that stuff. It was good. That was just work experience, that was part of school.

McDonalds was my first job. It's the only job I've ever had really. Just work at the register, learn how to make McChickens, McFilets, Fillet-o-fish. But it was horrible, I hated it. You only get paid \$6.60 an hour and cos I wasn't going to school, I was working every day and I was working all the time and it was just too much. You'd always get rude customers, always complaining and I hated it. I got along with everyone, I didn't have any arguments or problems with any of the people working there, it's just I didn't like the job.

My friend was working there. And she'd been working there for nine months and I was looking for a job. And one of the times I ran away, I was living at her house. So I decided to work at Maccas, and cos I wasn't going to school I was working *all* the time and I just hated it. They couldn't put me on seven days because of my age, but they pushed it pretty much. They were always asking me to stay back because they were paying me \$6.60 an hour – it was cheaper for them. But it was all the time. I was working constantly and I hated it. I had to give them two weeks' notice and I did that.

## Training: VCAL at TAFE

I heard about TAFE through Centrelink. It's really good there actually. They're not really strict on you. It was a bit far from here, but I've managed it. And because it's a smaller class, like sometimes there'd only be four people in the class, or maximum 10 to 12 kids, there was always a lot of help. We did all different things. We did a lot of projects, they were the main things. Once I knew what the project was, what I had to do, I was just working my arse off, always bringing work home, staying back at TAFE. I'm just glad I got it done. I liked the physical activities. I liked going out for sport and leisure and stuff – and we got marks on that as well. And cooking. We did a lot of films, just monologues about ourselves and all that stuff. It was good. We had ten units we had to pass to get our VCAL certificate. I just made sure I did all the work for those ten units and I *just* passed maths, so I'm happy about that because I never used to go, but I just passed it.

Some people, a lot of the people, there it takes two years to do their VCAL, Year 11 and 12. I'm pretty happy I've done it in one year. It's just those ten units you need to pass and if you only pass five or six then you've got to go back the next year to finish the rest of them and then you get your certificate.

There's workers there as well. They help you out if you need your learner's [permit]. I had a couple of court cases – transit fines on public transport – they took me to the court. I got all that worked out. Dental, I get free dental and my worker takes me there. It's helped a lot because my dad is always working and can't drive me around and that all the time. So it's been a big help and I'm glad I went there. They're joined with the Salvation Army, so they help you out with a lot of things.

### **Boyfriend problems**

We would have been together for almost two years. It was a long time. He was Lebanese, Muslim, and he was pretty much really overprotective. He was always coming to my TAFE, and if he'd seen me talking to another guy or whatever, he was causing troubles at TAFE, coming and having a go at the kids. He's 20, he couldn't do stuff like that. Just a lot of things he was hiding from me. And then he started getting a bit rough and he was always threatening me and shit like that. Then we did break up and I changed my number and then he came to my house. I got in trouble with my family, they didn't know I had a boyfriend. I got back together with him and then, it's been almost two weeks now, he kept calling me and calling me and I'm telling him, 'Piss off, I don't want nothing to do with you. Leave me alone'. And he just kept calling, 15 or 20 times on one night. He goes, 'If you don't come out, I'm coming to knock on your door'. And I'm like 'Fine'. And I get in the car, he was in the street, and he was really angry and pissed off at me. He's calling me all these names and 'Who do you think you are?'... and I'm just agreeing with him and making him more pissed off. And then he kept driving and I'm like 'I want to get out of the car'. He was going through red lights, he wouldn't stop the car. He kept pulling my hair and whacking me against the window. I was really scared and he just kept telling me 'I'm going to belt the \*\*\*\* out of you'. I knew he was serious and he scared me. There was nothing I could do and I knew he was going to hurt me, so I lifted the handbrake up and we almost crashed because the roads were wet. And then as soon as the car stopped I just got out of the car and bolted. And then the cops came. The cops were nice to me, they were on my side. They just said I need a restraining order against him, you know. Otherwise there's nothing really they can do about it. They told me, 'Did you know he had two mobile phones?', and I didn't know that, and 'Did you know he's got a court case next week?' and I don't know what that was for. But yeah, I'm just happy he hasn't called me or messaged me or came to my TAFE or came to my house. So it's good.

I haven't got the restraining order, not yet. Because I wasn't sure, cos I'm 17, if I needed my parents there and I haven't really told my dad about it. But my dad didn't want nothing to do with him when I told him about him. But then this place, some women's violence place or something, they called me today but I missed the call. They told me because I'm 17 I can go through it myself. But I don't know, I'm having second thoughts whether I should get it or not because I haven't heard from him. But then I think it's better to be safe than sorry.

My worker called the women's violence place for me. Because I called the courts and they told me I'd have to get my dad, and he's always busy working, or a guardian which I don't have, so it would have to be my dad. So I wasn't going to get it done. But now that I can get it by myself, I probably will go through with it, I don't know.

When I was with my boyfriend, I was seeing him every day. He'd come to my TAFE every lunch time. When he finished work around 4.30 or 5.00, he'd come here. We'd meet up for a bit. And then later on that night, we'd meet up again. I was in and out, in and out. And yeah, I'm not like that any more. I just started focusing on doing my VCAL, getting that done. Now that's done, so now I'm home more and helping around the house, just washing and dishes and food and all that stuff. So yeah, my dad's a bit more happy.

## Running away

2006 wasn't a very good year for me. I ran away about four different times in that year, so I don't know when it was that I came back. I wouldn't have a clue. It was just kind of school got a bit too hard and Dad wasn't really letting me out, letting me do anything. I just kind of got sick of it so I left. One time I ran away with my friend up the road. Another time was with another girl from school. The other two times I went by myself.

Me and the girl up the road, we kind of planned it. She came over one night, and this was when I wasn't having any problems at home. And she needed to borrow the grater or something like that and then she was whispering to me when I was doing the dishes, my dad was in the kitchen as well. And she's like, 'I'm pissed off at me mum. I want to leave, I want to run away. Like tomorrow, pick me up from Target. And we'll just leave. Pack your stuff tonight. I've already started packing'. And I'm like, 'OK, whatever'. This is the first time I ran away. I had all my stuff packed and took it to school that day and then met up with my boyfriend at the time – well he wasn't really my boyfriend, it was this guy we met off the chat line, me and her. And then we went and picked her up and then we ended up going to Adelaide for a drive. Then she was crying all the time, she missed her mum. Then we dropped her off and then that was when I ended up in the newspaper and all that and I had to come home. It was in the *Herald Sun*. They put me in the newspaper and I was on the news because I was a missing person. The guy I was with thought I was 18 and then it came up that I was 15 or whatever, so I had to go.

When we went to Adelaide, the guys we were with, they just drove there and we didn't know why and then it turns out like the boot was all filled with tobacco and they were selling it or something. And we both got freaked out. We only went there for the day and then they drove to go drop the tobacco off or whatever, they left us at this motel by ourselves and they didn't come back for ages. And then the people at reception were pretty much kicking us out. We were so scared, we didn't know what to do. I was this close to calling my dad and I'm like 'He's going to *kill* me' and then they ended up coming back and we came back to Melbourne.

## Going back to school

I was going back to school but I guess they kind of got sick of it. So they kind of kicked me out. I think it was Year 10. First they were helping me. I was doing all right, but then I stuffed it up for myself because I just kind of showed them that I didn't really care by always leaving and not telling anyone where I was. And just doing my own thing. So it was kind of my own fault pretty much.

What happened was I wanted to go back and then the vice-principal called and I was too scared to answer my phone. And then through a couple of the other girls who go there they said, 'You know you're not allowed at the school, they're going to call the police if you come to the school'. I don't know if the police bit was true, but yeah, they didn't want me back at the school.

## Looking for work

I've got too many friends that are in part-time jobs and I don't see the point in it. I mean I wanted to do that when I was at TAFE, and then when I've realised these ten units had to be done, I've worked out how the VCAL certificate works, I preferred to do one thing at a time. Wherever I work, that's what I want to do for the rest of my life. I don't want different part-time jobs, even though it helps on your résumé.

My worker at TAFE, she's going to help me out with a traineeship. I've finished TAFE, I don't have to go back to TAFE and they've got activities on for the next couple of weeks, and she's going to help me get my learner's because a couple of times I've had appointments and I've had to cancel them for whatever reason. So she's going to help me get that done and she's going to look into the traineeships that they've got available for next year. I've got to get back to her on that, we're going to work it out together. [*The worker can provide help even though she has finished*

*with TAFE.*] They'll still call and keep in contact and stuff like that, so it's good. They even have people in their early 20s who go there and they used to teach them. It's JPET? I always forget the names.

My sister works at recruitment agencies and all that. And she's told me it's better to do a traineeship than an apprenticeship, because with an apprenticeship you don't get paid as much and with a traineeship you're actually working but you're getting trained at the same time and you're getting full wages. I mean money isn't really an issue to me right now because I'm living at home and I'm not paying board or anything. But yeah, why not? Works out better for me.

### **Other occupation options**

*When she was 15 Maddie said she was interested in hairdressing or child-care.*

My friend actually did her first year of hairdressing and just the things she told me, and I used to go wait for her to finish work. She did my hair a couple of times and I used to go in to her work and it's just not really the thing for me. And because she was under DHS or whatever, they paid for her thing, and it's not cheap either and I don't want to have to pay money or make my dad pay money and I'm not going to enjoy it at the end of the day. And because I've done office work now at my sister's and I enjoyed it.

It wasn't really child-care I was into, it was more that I like kids. Like I still do now. And *every* girl on the street is having kids at young ages. They've all got kids now. And so I see all the little babies all the time and so I'm not really into child-care any more. My friend, she's a year younger than me, she turned 16 a couple of days ago. She's six or seven months pregnant with a baby girl. My next-door neighbour she just had a kid and her sister's pregnant and she's due in February and she's just had her son a couple of months ago and he's gorgeous. And at my TAFE three girls have had kids in like the last year. So everyone, everywhere.

### **Assistance**

I've pretty much just got my worker to help me. And my sister.

What happened was with Centrelink they'd send me out forms, you know, I'd have to go and hand in my dole forms. And then I got sent out a letter saying that I either have to be working or studying, like I just couldn't just be doing neither, even though I was meant to be looking for work. And through Centrelink they got me on to this other worker and she was like, 'Yeah I'm going to help you out with what you're going to do', because I wasn't doing anything at the time. Then once I got to TAFE, I got a new worker so they didn't have to worry about my old worker. So I pretty much got on to TAFE because of Centrelink.

My worker's been really helpful. Like even if I'm upset, or how I was upset with my boyfriend and I was just feeling a bit down, she always cheered me up or she'd take me out somewhere. She's always helpful and she'd always talk to me and listen to what I had to say and stuff like that. But even my teachers at TAFE, like they're always nice and caring and stuff like that.

### **Money**

I get Youth Allowance \$190 a fortnight. I don't have to pay board and I don't have any bills. So just pretty much it just goes on hair products, nails you know, whatever I need. Credit for my phone. I mean there's extra things I'd like to get maybe, solarium and stuff like that. But they're not things I need.

### **The future**

Once I get on to this traineeship I'll be set, I won't have any other worries. That's pretty much my only problem at the moment, because I've got to make sure I get into it before it's too late. I don't want to leave it too long and then I have to wait another year, otherwise I will have to do part-time

work ... I'm pretty good at organising things. I like customer service, working with people. That's why I like reception.

In the next year or two? Just save up and maybe travel somewhere, even if it's not interstate, even if it's just on the Spirit of Tasmania. I don't know, just get on a holiday or something like that. I'd like to save for a car.

### **Advice to services to help young people**

Number one, family is very important. I kind of took that for granted when I was younger, a couple of years ago actually. They mean a lot more to you than you really think. And education is important because at the end of the day, if you want to do something in your life, if you want to be something, you need that education, you can't expect anyone to give you a job and you don't know much. It's just all about being organised, you can't think life is a party and you can just do what you want and you can go out when you want to. It's not all about boys and getting a boyfriend, it's not about that. And sometimes you've just got to be careful who you trust – sometimes you're friends aren't always what they make out they are.

You've just got to put your mind to one thing and just do it. You know you can't be thinking about other things, you've got to have your head cleared and think this is what I want to do and you've just got to do that one thing. Doesn't matter how hard it gets or whatever, try and get the help and support, and you've got to stick to the one thing and don't go off track and go and just do something else.

## Emma

### Background

*Emma grew up in a family that was on a medium income for most of her childhood, with her father working full-time and her mother at home and doing voluntary work. By the time she was in her mid teens, her father had had a redundancy and was working part-time and the family was on a lower income.*

*At age 6 Emma had started school and was generally happy and creative.*

*At 11 she was in Grade 6. She wanted to be a singer or a musician when she grew up.*

*Aged 16 she left school at the end of Year 10.*

### Leaving school

I left school because I felt a bit afraid of this year. It's not just the workload, it's the whole environment, it's the other kids, it's an all girls' school. It was just the other kids I was with, I mean I hated going to school.

### VCAL at TAFE

I'm doing VCAL at TAFE. I like it. They're smaller classes, it's more friendly, seven people. It's called the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. VCAL hospitality I found out about through the careers adviser at my school, she talked about VCAL, but they weren't doing VCAL at my school that year.

### Future plans and work experience

Next I'm thinking about doing VCE at TAFE. This is only a very recent thing because before I was thinking about being a chef. The VCAL course I'm doing is about hospitality and I was thinking about being a chef. I've tried to get a couple of jobs in hospitality around the place. I tried to get a job in a fish and chip shop down in my street, I tried to get one at a place in a food court but none of them really worked out ... I'm thinking maybe because of these two jobs that didn't work out maybe the hospitality industry is not for me. I mean I haven't really considered doing a VCE at a TAFE, I thought if I had to do VCE it would probably have to be at my school and I wasn't really feeling comfortable at the school at that time. I keep on changing my mind.

My parents don't like the fact that I'm doing VCAL but I have thought about it and that's what I've come to. I still have to look further into the opportunity of doing VCE at TAFE. We just discussed it and it seemed like they'd be happy with it.

I've thought about going back to school, but I don't want to do it. There was just so much pressure. The teachers, everyone said that I was a very quiet student. I mean I was really quiet, but I didn't like the work there and sometimes I found it hard to concentrate and motivate myself to do the work. With VCAL it's true there is a lot less homework, my parents don't like that. A lot less, there is a little bit.

I am looking for work. Mum doesn't think I am looking for work. I feel I am. To find a job I basically go around giving people my résumé and they usually say, 'If we need someone we'll give you a call' – they don't usually. Actually my mum spotted this sign in the fish and chip shop saying they wanted workers, I suppose she did because she came home saying they wanted workers and so I went and gave them my résumé and I got a trial and I got told that I wasn't what they wanted. And I saw the sign, and so did my dad, we both saw the sign at the food court at separate times, saying that they wanted full-time and part-time employees, so I applied, I filled out an application form and had an unpaid trial and that was about 8 hours over two days. The fish and chip shop was about the same, I would say 12 hours.

## **Youth Allowance**

I've tried to apply for Youth Allowance but I haven't got it. My parents don't earn that much. Mum doesn't work and Dad works part-time. They actually sent us a letter telling Mum and Dad that they wanted us to send them a letter explaining how we supported ourselves because I think they thought our income was not enough to support all of us. It is enough to support all of us but we just have to write them a letter. Every time we try and apply we get another letter back. I haven't actually applied in a while.

## **November 2007 (age 17)**

*Aged 17, Emma had completed her VCAL year at TAFE and also completed one VCE subject at CAE. She was planning to do more VCE subjects in the next year.*

## **Since leaving school**

Well I left – first I was going to school at the end of last year, but I didn't really like it there. So I saw the careers counsellor, the careers adviser, and she suggested VCAL. She first suggested it at NMIT in Preston but that's a long way away from here. Then they told me about this TAFE and I thought maybe I could do VCAL here and the careers adviser sent a letter to the VCAL coordinator and I got an interview. I also applied for another TAFE to do VCAL. I didn't really think you could start doing VCAL halfway through the year or something, I thought you'd have to start at the start of the year, so I applied for these three different places. I ended up getting an interview for two on the same day. It was a bit tricky.

I didn't really like school. At the end of last year I had been called into one of the offices and two of the teachers came and said to me that because I wasn't doing my work that I couldn't do VCE there. I suppose they 'suggested' that VCE wasn't for me. It wasn't distressing, not distressing at all. I really was never motivated at school. When I understood the work – if it was for English maybe, and I remember I was doing a speech on body image in Year 9 and I did well on that. And there was another thing about the IR laws that I spoke on, and I did all right on that too. But other things, like this 'world of ideas' project, I really just didn't get. There were other things like maths and science and SOSE (that's history and geography together), things like that I didn't like. I just felt there was so much homework to do. All of these subjects and they're all due this week and sometimes it felt like it was too much and then I just stopped trying to do it all. Anyway when I got to the end of year 10, they called me in and said, 'We don't think that you're suited to doing the VCE at school' and I thought OK I can go and do VCAL, so I applied for VCAL and did that. It wasn't a problem them telling me I had to leave because I didn't like it there in the first place. It's not as though I wanted to stay there.

Not very often, but sometimes, I skipped class, just when I felt it was getting a bit too much and I really didn't like it. And they had recorded everything and they said I skipped some classes. If I'm really honest with myself I didn't really want to do VCE at school. I told everyone that I wanted to be a chef, I wanted to go and do VCAL because I wanted to be a chef, but what I really wanted I think was not to do VCE at that school.

## **VCAL at TAFE**

In the inductions at TAFE they showed us a PowerPoint of what we would be doing that year, the course itself. I knew it was going to be easy for me, that I would find it easy. Well I liked that but at the same time I knew it wouldn't give me very many opportunities. I also thought that I wanted to be a chef, but I don't think that any more.

The kind of realisation that I didn't want to be a chef, came halfway through the year. I went to see the counsellor at TAFE and I was talking to her about how (at school) I had enjoyed reading books and then analysing them, studying them. I didn't really like maths and science but I liked English. So she suggested going to CAE, the Centre for Adult Education. And I went there. I did Unit 2



English. I asked her if it would matter that I was just starting halfway through the year and she said that that wouldn't matter so I went and did that. Because I was feeling a bit trapped at TAFE. It was a bit too easy, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be a chef. So I went and did that and I really enjoyed that and now I've passed that.

Some of the people at TAFE I didn't like very much. For some reason I felt more vulnerable in the cooking classes than in the other classes. I don't know why it was. Maybe it was because of the teacher. It was a different teacher in cooking and I didn't like the cooking classes very much. I mean I really like cooking at home. I just don't know if I like cooking at TAFE. There were some things in cooking class. I thought if this is what it is like in cooking class, it would probably be much worse in the workforce. I just felt so intimidated. Like I dreaded going into cooking class. I really hated it. The teacher was all right, but I'm a very quiet person. Even though I was slower at cooking than the other members of my class, he usually just let me get on with it. Even though I usually made about one mistake each class, he would tell me what I was doing wrong or I would figure it out myself and just correct myself and keep going. There was one guy, I didn't like him. At the beginning of the year, a few weeks in, I got myself all set up and everything and this guy said, 'Can I work where you're working?' and I said no. He wanted to be next to his friend, but he came late and I said no but eventually I did move. And the teacher came around later on and said, 'Did he force you to, did he intimidate you into moving?' and I said 'Yeah' and he really didn't like me after that. I tried to keep away from him. That was one of the reasons I didn't like cooking classes.

I'm trying to think about the beginning of the year. Do you want to know some of the projects that we've done? At the beginning of the year we did the tram project, which was where we went on a tram and gave strangers little biscuits. Only the serving people were doing that, I was meant to be doing that. We each had allocated jobs and it was like this whole day and this footballer came and these primary school kids came and the footballer played a game of football with the primary school kids. I think he was from the Saints, St Kilda. And I interviewed him and I wrote up the interview. We were handing out biscuits because it was supposed to be a Koori thing, an Aboriginal thing, we were supposed to be educating people about Aboriginal culture, a little bit. We were handing out these biscuits on a tram, on the City Circle tram. So that was a fun day. Every one came to that. They had the hand painting, everyone dipped their hand in the paint and put their handprint on the thing, all the primary school children did that.

Another project we did was the consumer information project. That's where schools in the state of Victoria volunteered to participate in this project. You had to do a board game or a website or a PowerPoint presentation or maybe a poster or something that informed people about something about consumerism, maybe buying a second-hand car or buying a new mobile phone or buying something new, or maybe just consumerism in general. We did a PowerPoint presentation about body image and we won the VCAL section. I was happy about that.

Another project we did was the Big Foot project, that was like a scavenger hunt around the city and we had to make it and find it and swap it with another team in our class and do that for one day. That was fairly simple I think.

All through the year we'd get various worksheets and things. We didn't do much maths this year, not much at all. Sometimes we'd get surveys. There were these two youth group workers, they were studying youth work at Victoria University and they were doing, I think they said it was 'placement' at TAFE. They were doing a research project about the transition from normal school to VCAL. That was part of their course and they did surveys through out the year, they gave surveys to us. They were fine, I didn't have any problem with that.

I've finished VCAL. I'm sure I'll be able to go back and get the certificate tomorrow or else they'll send it to you. Just because I've done VCAL, it doesn't mean I'm qualified to be a chef. That would be a start.

## CAE English

In the second half of the year I was doing VCE English which I much preferred. I preferred it to VCAL because it was more challenging, it was more interesting, more interesting people and teachers, and just more organised. Each week we generally read a short story and then we spend each lesson, we read in class and then over the course of the week, we write a creative response about that story. I don't know why I liked it so much, it was just interesting, like 'I can do this'. Cos like the people at school said I wasn't ready for it, but I found out that I was ready for it. Maybe I was ready for doing one subject, because I was only doing one subject this year, but I still did it, I did the work. I liked the stories and everything was so clear and the teacher was good and when you talked about the stories you just felt if you had any questions you could just ask. And it was just so much better than school. I liked that I had an entire week to do the work. I didn't feel overwhelmed at the amount of work I had to do.

## Next year

And next year I'm going to be doing Unit 3 and 4 of English and Unit 1 and 2 of maths, legal studies and psychology. Well that's what I'm planning. I haven't actually enrolled yet.

I won't be doing the VCAL any more, so I'll have a lot more time. I don't know, I hope I'll be able to do it. Just one class all week for one of the subjects and because I'm only doing four, rather than I think there was seven I was doing at school, I think it will be a little easier, even though I might have to work a lot harder than I have been this year. And also I'll only be doing Unit 1 and 2 of the other subjects, because I didn't want to do [Unit] 3 and 4 of all the subjects in the one year.

## Looking for work

I'm not really looking for work. I was quite discouraged by both of those jobs I went for earlier in the year not working out. I was thinking maybe I could try again for another job like that, but maybe I'm just not for that kind of job, maybe I'm too clumsy or something.

At the fish and chip shop, I did the cash register a little bit and I made a few mistakes. I cut a few lemons and if ever they needed dim sims or potato cakes then I'd go and fetch them from the freezer. I put soy sauce on the dim sims, but I didn't do any actual cooking. What I did do sometimes is throw the chips into the deep fryer and then you take them out and throw them into the box once they were cooked. They definitely felt that I wasn't suited for it. They didn't yell at me or anything. They just said that I would probably be more suited to a slower environment, that maybe a restaurant would be better.

I think there would probably be jobs available, I could fill out an application form and put it in and they might ring me up and say, 'Come and do a trial', and the whole process would happen again. I would go for the trial and, I don't know, I think there might be a slight possibility that they would give me the job, but I don't think they probably would. I wouldn't be feeling very confident about it. Maybe I'm just not very good at beaming at people.

Like now I don't know if I'm suited to any job but ... well I've got to finish the VCE, maybe I'll be a music teacher because I play piano and cello, or maybe I will become an English teacher because I like English. I don't know. If I get a good enough VCE score maybe I could get into a law course at university. If I did that, that would be good. I don't know if I would be so good at being a lawyer but if I got into the course, I could do that. But I don't know if I will.

## Assistance

Some people have been helpful about what I want to do. Yes, at CAE definitely. Family, yes. Friends? I saw my friends from school a few weeks ago, I hadn't seen them in a very long time, I've spoken to one of them since on the phone, on the internet. Sometimes I see another one. But

other than that I haven't seen them. They weren't all that supportive or helpful, not really, because we don't really speak about this, talk about what we're going to do and things like that. Both the career counsellors were really helpful, both at school and at TAFE. I hadn't heard of this TAFE when I went and saw the careers counsellor at school. I hadn't heard of CAE but I went and saw the other careers counsellor. They were helpful just because they gave good advice. Well obviously they knew what they were talking about or I suppose they wouldn't be in that job. They were just nice. Like the careers counsellor at school was definitely nicer than those two teachers who told me that I couldn't do this year there. (Not that those two teachers were really un-nice I suppose, I suppose they just had to say that to me.) They just introduced me to things that were on my path to where I wanted to go.

I saw a psychologist. That was at the start of this year I first saw him, because Mum and Dad didn't like the fact that I was going to TAFE. I don't really think he told me anything I didn't already know or introduce me to anything I didn't know about. It's not as though I was upset about anything. I didn't feel like I need to see him. It's just that Mum, my parents, didn't like that I was going to TAFE and I told them that I wanted to be a chef and they didn't like that. It was not really because they were really against being a chef but because they didn't want me do VCAL instead of VCE because they thought that that would give me much less options. I agree with them now.

I may need help next year with all the work that I have to do. Right now I don't think I really need help. I have to read the texts that I have to do that we'll be studying next year. I'll be doing that in the holidays. If I was finding the work difficult I would go and speak to one of the teachers or email one of the teachers or I might speak to my parents.

### **Money**

The only money I have is pocket money, Dad gives me like \$20 a fortnight. Mum and Dad usually buy our clothes from the Brotherhood, that's a second-hand store. I used to be really interested in fashion, but now I've just completely gone off it. I think that was about the start of this year. I just went off it. I don't like it any more. Now I'm perfectly happy with the clothes I've already got and I don't buy any more clothes. Except I might buy some board shorts because I need them for summer. They pay for all the food obviously. I watch TV. Other than that, I don't feel I really need money. Except at times I like to buy a CD, I really like music.

### **Music**

I like playing music and buying music. I play in a strings orchestra on Monday nights. That's when the rehearsal is. It's very important to me. We've been doing that for a long time now. When I say it's important to me, sometimes I'm not so sure because it's such a *drag* practising. I feel like I want to give it up sometimes, then I wouldn't have to practise every single day. But Mum and Dad always convince me not to give it up so I'm still doing it.

### **Advice for services to help young people**

If I was advising a service how to help young people who had left school plan for their future – they need to know all the options, knowing how to get more information about all those options, I suppose, being understanding and all of that. I think the most of what is needed is knowing all the available options at that time. I suppose you don't have to know all the details but know how to get further details. A place for a service, I suppose a counsellor, a telephone advice service. Would you go to the library, do you think?

