

# Young people in Western Sydney's voices on work

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# **Authors**

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### **Report Authors**



#### Dr Jacqueline Mackaway

School of Social Science, Macquarie University

Dr Jacqueline Mackaway is a social researcher interested in workplace diversity and inclusion, work and employment, and the future of work. She has also published extensively on work-integrated learning.

When Jacqueline's not researching, she's busy teaching at the School of Social Science at Macquarie University. Prior to teaching and researching, she worked in human resource management across a range of sectors and ran her own small consulting business.



#### Dr Maria Florencia Amigo

Education, Enterprise & Engagement, University of Sydney

Dr Maria Florencia Amigo is a sociocultural anthropologist and research consultant. She is currently an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Anthropology at Macquarie University and is a senior lecturer at the Education, Enterprise and Engagement Portfolio at the University of Sydney.

Maria has worked on work and employment-related topics for almost two decades. She has conducted research on children, youth and migrants' work and employment, as well as on work-integrated learning. She is also the current president of Multicultural Integration Community Support (MICS), a community organisation that assists with migrant settlement in the Northern suburbs of Sydney.

# **Executive Summary**

Since 2008 young people continue to experience high rates of unemployment and underemployment, particularly those with low educational attainment (Productivity Commission, 2020). Young people have also been significantly impacted by the effects of Covid-19 and the pandemic - isolation, job loss, interruptions to study/training, and associated psychological distress (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021). This is a report based on a mixed-methods study of twenty-two young people's (age 17-25) experiences of [un] employment in Western Sydney. It aims to give voice to young workers, and inform actions for employers to improve young people's access to and experience of work.

Findings highlight the unique challenges faced by young people as they make the transition from school to work. These include a lack of direction and support once they leave school, poor treatment by employers who see them as a cheap and expendable source of labour, along with workplace practices that do not account for their aspirations, needs and responsibilities. The report includes insights and recommendations on measures young people told us they want taken by employers so they can access and keep better quality jobs. Importantly, young workers emphasise that they want to work – they want the opportunity to grow up, and build happy and fulfilling lives.



# **Key Findings**

### **Challenging transitions**

While in school young people often have ideas about potential jobs and careers they want, but once they leave these aspirations and plans can quickly evaporate. This study identified a range of barriers that make the transition from school to work challenging for young people. Overall young people feel let down by the quality of support, and treatment, they receive from employment service providers and employers. In general, these young people are disillusioned with how employment works which presents a risk of disengagement from both work and training. The following are the main issues impacting their experience of transitioning from school to work:

- Undefined career aspirations and plans, which leads to prioritizing 'just getting a job to make money' versus building a career
- A lack of time and effort by employment services to understand their interests and needs to help them plan a career and find opportunities that align with their goals
- Limited work experience means young people are often overlooked by employers if someone with more experience is available not given a chance to show their potential
- Few permanent entry level positions made available by employers across a range of sectors
- Unrealistic expectations by employers of what young people can do when first starting work
- Unfair and onerous recruitment practices which take considerable time and effort
- Essential criteria, rates of pay and other important information is left off job advertisements, which young people perceive as unfair and used as a way to discriminate against them





### Difficult work experiences

The transition for young people into the world of work is complex, intimidating, confusing and confronting. A series of both practical and attitudinal barriers were identified in the study as factors that shape these young people's experiences of work. Overall, these young people encounter difficult and unsupportive work environments that can be detrimental to the definition of their career goals, their health – including mental health, personal lives and financial autonomy. The following are the main issues impacting their experiences of work and workplaces:

- Lack of, or limited, training and induction when starting a new job
- Casualisation, unstable and unpredictable work, which deters career progression or economic independence
- Neglect of the 'whole person', and limited acknowledgement of the complexities in young people's private lives
- Work practices or Work, Health and Safety (WHS) concerns that jeopardize the safety and duty of care workers are entitled to
- Aggressive, racist and unprofessional behaviour is sometimes tolerated in the workplace, leaving young and inexperienced workers feeling unsafe, stressed and anxious
- Poor accessibility to workplaces (both in terms of public transport and distance from residential areas), aggravated by the start or end times of shifts which can happen way outside usual business hours
- Limited flexibility around work arrangements, and lack of tolerance when unforeseen circumstances disrupt rigid schedules of young workers
- Generational mistreatment from older towards younger workers, even when completing the same tasks or when younger workers lead teams of older workers

# Respect

The stories shared in this study reveal many young people experience a *lack of respect*, during the period following the transition from school to employment, and during their first years as workers.

- Being young and lacking experience seems to lead to less consideration, recognition, pay and care on behalf of employers and co-workers
- Lack of respect manifests in a variety of both subtle and blatant ways, in the practical and relational aspects of young people's experiences of work
- Seen as expendable to some employers makes young workers appear disillusioned, unmotivated, angry and frustrated

# What young people recommend

Young people told us what they believe employers could do to improve access to jobs and experiences of work. Some of these recommendations require both attitudinal and practical changes, but are seen as measures that could make a real difference to young workers.

Young people recommend that:

- Employers be more flexible and inclusive with work conditions and recognize them as 'whole people' with needs, preferences, responsibilities and aspirations.
- Employers provide training that is appropriate for the task/s they are asked to perform.
- More opportunities and career paths be made available to them so they have the chance to build happy and fulfilling work and personal lives.
- Employers develop and improve their mental health literacy so that workplaces are safer and more inclusive places.



# Background to the study

Despite labour and skills shortages, employers in Western Sydney struggle to attract and retain young workers. Indeed, today's young people experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than the generation prior to them, with long term unemployment also on the rise (Productivity Commission, 2020). Intergenerational social and economic disadvantage is a pressing issue in outer Sydney, unlikely to change without addressing the persistent and complex problem of high levels of youth unemployment (O'Neill, 2017; Tanton et al., 2021).

The focus of this study was to explore with young people their experiences with the job market in Western Sydney. Listening to young people and drawing insights from their experiences should help to increase understanding and inform actions for employers regarding ways to improve attraction and retention of young workers.

The target group was young people aged 17-25 living in Western Sydney who were either working, looking for work and/or studying in some form of education/training other than university. University educated young people were not part of the study. The aim was to have a sample of at least 40% coming from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, 10% being First Nations, and a balance of genders.

### Who took part in the research

The project was advertised with assistance from Social Ventures Australia, Youth Action, several employment service providers and Council youth workers located in Western Sydney. One hundred and three (103) young people registered on-line to be involved in the project. However, only 22 participated in both the interview and on-line survey.

| Age   |     | Gender            |     |
|-------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| 17-18 | 10% | Female            | 55% |
| 19-21 | 40% | Male              | 35% |
| 22-24 | 50% | Non-binary        | 5%  |
|       |     | Prefer not to say | 5%  |

| Cultural and linguistic background         |     | Highest level of education         |     |
|--|-----|------------------------------------|-----|
| First Nations                              | 25% | Primary                            | 1%  |
| Born overseas                              | 55% | High school<br>(less than year 12) | 34% |
| Speaks language other than English at home | 40% | High school<br>(year 12)           | 34% |
|  |     | Other                              | 30% |

- 30% had caring responsibilities (67% for children; 15% for parents)
- 36% living with a mental health condition
- Only one of the participants had never worked
- 20% had been out of work for more than 6 months
- 80% were working or had been working in the previous six months
- 60% had worked across two or more sectors (retail, hospitality and manufacturing)
- 50% reported never having worked in a sector that they wanted to stay in long term
- 2 in the group expected to be with their current employer for more than 2 years
- 45% had completed vocational training, with 15% currently studying



### Research approach and questions asked

The research was conducted using mixed methods, through a small-scale survey followed by semi-structured interviews. The data collection occurred between October 2021 and March 2022, during the Covid-19 pandemic. To accommodate government enforced lockdowns and restrictions, which were subject to change at short notice, the study was designed so that all data could be collected digitally and on-line (i.e., on-line survey and interviews using zoom or phone).

The aim of this research was to give voice to the lived experiences of young people. The survey questions were designed to gather basic demographic information to help form a picture of the young people from Western Sydney. Information was gathered on: age, gender identification, cultural and linguistic background, level of education, caring responsibilities and disability. Respondents were also asked to provide information on their work and education history; current employment status; length of (un)employment; sector/s they worked or were working in; career plans; vocational training completed and/or currently underway. The survey was followed by an interview. The interview was designed to encourage young people to share their experiences of (un)employment and ideas about how jobs and employers could improve for young people. Questions centered around six main themes:

- Transition after school, aspirations and career plans/paths
- Current (or most recent) work situation/job
- Relational dimensions of workplaces
- Unemployment or underemployment
- Barriers to getting a job
- Barriers to keeping a job
- Improving conditions for young workers
- Suggestions for employers

### **Difficulties and Limitations**

Recruitment for this study was challenging and meant only 22 young people were interviewed and not the 50 initially planned. A few possible explanations may account for the difficulties encountered: young people in the sample lack access to internet and/or zoom or are unfamiliar with zoom; general fatigue due to Covid-19 and therefore not interested in participating in an activity that requires a level of cognitive engagement; young people are in precarious work which means it is difficult to manage time and plan too far in advance – so hard to lock in interviews. While the in-depth interviews did provide rich data from which set of common themes emerged, the small sample size makes it difficult to draw broad generalisations.

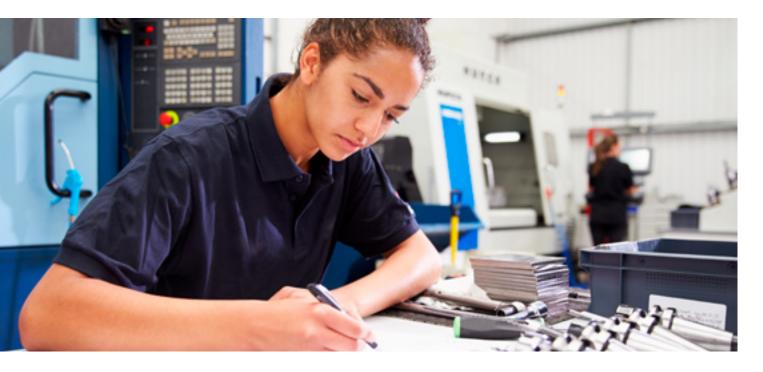
# Unpacking key findings

### Transitioning from school to work

Experiences shared by young people in the interviews reveal that transitioning from school to work can be a challenge. Common to the majority of experiences was that the career goals and plans that they may have had while in school soon evaporate once they leave. The loss of guidance and encouragement from a school careers counsellor or interested teacher left some without access to either a relevant or supportive network, and then they are unsure about how to progress their initial plans. Notably, the majority of young people interviewed spoke about work in terms of needing an income to support themselves, with 65% of those surveyed saying their main job or most recent job was a 'job to get by right now' and only 15% indicating that their current job was directly aligned with their career aspirations.

Many young people talked about the challenges they face with onerous recruitment processes, requiring considerable time and effort. In some instances, they also face a lack of transparency, and honesty, from employers during the recruitment process. For them this occurred when key information is left off job ads such as essential criteria (e.g., driving and forklift licenses), rates of pay or the terms of employment (e.g., permanent or casual). The burdensome and abstruse nature of the recruitment process is further problematic when you have limited work experience and help from other more experienced people, or you consider that the job may only be casual and you are regularly applying for work. Most young people talked about receiving little or no feedback from recruiters/employers about why they were unsuccessful, leaving them unclear about what they may be doing wrong and disillusioned with how employment works. The risk is that the effort required by some job application processes may not be perceived by young people as worth it.

With limited or no work experience to include on an on-line application some felt that this commonly used approach to recruitment put them at a further disadvantage in the job market. Some perceived that a face to face interview was better as it provided a way to 'sell' themselves – a chance to show an employer their potential. Indeed, it is their lack of work experience that most young people see as their biggest barrier to employment. Many spoke of being trapped in a 'vicious circle' – namely, you can't get work if you don't have relevant experience, and you can't get that experience if you can't get a job. Few entry level jobs across a range of industries further complicates their efforts to get quality experience and develop skills that employers value.





You get support in high school, but yeah, once you leave school, you're on your own, you really don't know who to talk to.

#### Female, 24

And I knew someone to get this job. I did apply for a lot of jobs before this one, but I'd get turned down and I think it's just because of my experience or the lack of my job experience. This was my first job. At the time, I was handing CVs out. I was applying online. Yeah, I was doing everything I could. It was hard.

#### Female, 24

The job listing didn't say anything in the requirements about having a license...I'm not going to apply for something I can't get to by public transport...I've already checked that there's a train station near and they said "You're not driving". I'm like, "oh, no, I don't drive at the moment". "Okay, well, that is actually a requirement for this job... so we can't go forward".

#### Male, 23

I'm young and because I didn't have the experience like other people...like I said, applying online just doesn't really give me a shot to show myself.

#### Male, 21

Should you want to join an industry, they want you to be experienced in that industry. I don't know how to get experience if no one's gonna give me a shot.

#### Male, 21

### Difficult work experiences

Stories from young workers reflect challenging first experiences of work and workplaces. There were two broad reasons for this, which can be identified as practical and socio-emotional. On the practical side, experiences of work can be tough because they are mostly casual and unstable, physically demanding and occasionally detrimental to their health, but also poorly supported. On the socio-emotional side, young workers often feel disrespected, if not neglected, by older workers. This includes a lack of acknowledgement of how their complex lives are – which often include health issues, caring or studying responsibilities — which may interfere with work.

The bulk of jobs for which young people can apply for are casual and seasonal. For those who have made the decision to solely concentrate on work, the casualization of the job market leads to poorer work experiences, unstable work-related networks, and most importantly, deferred economic independence and unpredictable personal finances. Not having access to any leave entitlements, not knowing whether they would get a shift the following week, and even being concerned about making a mistake which could jeopardize a repeat shift were comments that signal the lack of protection young workers may be subjected too. Limited accessibility to those casual jobs adds to the poor work experience. Most workers used public transport to get to difficult-to-reach areas, often outside regular business hours, thus leading to a disproportionate amount of time spent on commuting and feelings of unsafety.

It kind of sucks, because I don't get all the benefits... the other benefits, like having personal days, sick leave all that stuff is so good to me. And also... I feel more worried if I was making a mistake.

#### Male, 21

The sort of work is mainly casual... a block, a shift here a shift there... you get a short term contract for a chunk of time. For the jobs that I'm looking for, which is pick-packing roles, a lot of them are just casual... they want you just for six weeks.

#### Female, 21

I was working in the distribution center, the warehouse and the factory... those locations are really inaccessible... in the middle of nowhere and I don't have my driver's license.

#### Male, 24

Added to the difficulty of having to deal with jobs that are unstable and remote, there also seems to be an expectation that young people will know – or quickly learn — what is required in a new job without a proper induction or training program. When we prompted young workers to talk about how on-the-job learning and training supported their introduction and progression in new work environments, responses pointed to a remarkable unawareness on behalf of employers of the training needs of young people. Young people mentioned they didn't have the knowledge and skills they needed, but also that they did not get much support from team leaders. What was even more surprising was young people's references to a series of work practices where their physical and mental health was put at risk, such as lifting heavy loads, insufficient rests in production lines, standing up for long hours without proper breaks or suitable shoes, or unreasonable start and finishing times for shifts.

On the first two days she was expecting me to know everything. It was just really hard. [The team leader] said 'you have to be faster and learn all this', and it just made me really sad.

#### Female, 21

My biggest fear is not knowing what I'm doing. [You want to] get the right training for the job... so you go to work and do your job efficiently, without being stressed.

#### Male, 21

I was trying to serve a customer I turned around and slipped, I fell and... they say "it's your fault, we don't care"... I didn't know the rules or anything. I worked there pretty much the whole pregnancy.. I was working from 6 to 3 [and] they didn't give me time to have enough breaks...

#### Female, 21

I had to be standing for a long period of time on hard ground with uncomfortable boots, they hurt your feet, and you have to be twisting and turning, constantly, repeating the same thing over and over again. In an 8-hour shift you get half an hour break, but even with that break you wouldn't recover.



The socio-emotional reasons for poor work experiences would be clearly connected to the realities of workplaces mentioned above. However, aside from issues around the actual work, references to employers' reluctance to consider the many dimensions in young workers' lives, such as caring responsibilities, disabilities, ill-health or mental health conditions, added to workers' negative experiences, as they felt they lacked the support or flexibility to be able to properly juggle work with their private lives. Young workers also referred to the intergenerational power differentials that led to experiences of being mistreated, ignored and being taken advantage of at the workplace, to the sole reason of being young.

I'd like] the flexibility of choosing your own roster... so then you know that you'll be able to come in and not disappoint the employer. Because, you know, it's probably a bit of a shame if you told the employer 'I've currently need to get my kids out of school'. We could discuss that over the flexibility of our shifts.

#### Female, 24

If you say 'I can't make this day', they won't give you shifts for like two weeks... as a punishment. If you try to contact them, they turn around you and start yelling at you and say it's not my fault if you are sick.

#### Female, 21

The day before my shift I was coming down with a bit of a cold... so I sent an email to the HR advisor, and I said, 'hey, can I work from home tomorrow, because I'm coming down with a cold and I'm a bit under the weather, but I'm more than happy to work'. And she said, 'Oh no working from home is only available to people who are meeting their performance targets.

#### Male, 23

So in the chicken factory... I was the only person in charge there... but because of my age, the other people didn't like that, they chose not to listen. If I had to tell them to do something they tried to tell me what to do.

# (Lack of) Respect

Societal perceptions of young workers being widely available, strong, energetic, and resilient were challenged by the narratives of vulnerability and disrespect in the study. The issues identified above, that make the transition from school to work and those first work experiences so difficult, suggest that young people's complex lives are rarely considered, and that young workers are often exposed to both overt and concealed mistreatment or neglect when looking for jobs and at the workplace.

Participants in this study mentioned a number of factors (including health, disability and caring responsibilities) that may interfere in how they complete their jobs, on their social interactions at work, their punctuality or reliability, and even in the type of work they apply for. However, they felt these are very rarely taken into consideration. On the other hand, accounts of how unstable work (and income) can be, and of the lack of guidance and support upon starting a new role add to feelings of lack of consideration. Even more concerning were stories indicating that young workers are often tolerant of extreme work practices that may put their physical and mental health at risk. Some of these stories suggest young workers can be unaware of their rights to work in environments where WHS practices are observed, and breaches reported.

An analysis of these negative experiences points at a lack of respect, manifested in myriad ways, from employers and co-workers towards young workers. This contributes to feelings of discomfort, insecurity, misrecognition, and even stress and anxiety. Often, a combination of these feelings provided reasons for young people to leave a job or sector.

I was never valued...no one ever listens to the instructions I gave, no one included me in conversations... because I was the youngest. I was always left out and never knew what was going on. I felt like everyone would step over the top of me... especially people that are older than me, they would never appreciate that I was actually an adult.

#### Female, 20

I asked one question about the employment contract and I got called an idiot and I'm not suitable for the company if I can't even read a little contract...someone my age would ask more questions...and you should ask questions about things before you sign them...Well, he took it as you're not suitable for us. Goodbye.

#### Female, 24

I still haven't really worked full time. I'm 22. I feel like I'm so far behind in life.

#### Female, 22

I did get noticed because the other person got moved to somewhere else but it's not that I was told you've done a good job or congratulations, or anything like that in my other works.

The job listing didn't say anything in the requirements about having a license or anything...I'm not going to apply for something I can't get to by public transport...I've already checked you know, there's a train station near and they said "You're not driving". I'm like, "oh, no, I don't drive at the moment at all". "Okay, well, you know, that is actually a requirement for this job. So, unfortunately, we can't go forward with this one". And then I tried in a way of not being rude... "Okay, just to let you know, I think it's a good idea to put that in the job description in the job posting"... so not waste people's time.

Male, 23



### Stories of resilience and encouragement

Despite the prevailing grim findings, the study also gathered encouraging stories of young workers' resilience and reflections on how to take charge of their future, as well as of caring, supportive employers. Some participants showed glimpses of hope and aspiration, and determination to pursue a career of choice in the face of all the challenges. For some, a particular occupation was mentioned as a plan they have had for a long time and were not willing to give up on, or as an unexpected opportunity that was presented to them. For the latter, the role played by a caring employer or colleague, who showed interest in the young person's future development or just consideration of the worker's circumstances and responsibilities, were key factors in the young employee developing a strong sense of duty to that employer, and a desire to progress upon the discovery of a potential career path.

I'm searching for work...but it's quite difficult to actually find entry level jobs... in the meantime, I have been sending my CV to recruiters...I do volunteering when I get the chance, short term opportunities to improve myself, especially my public speaking skills, I feel that I've gained a lot of experience doing different volunteering and my communication has improved.

#### Female, 24

After school I really wanted to be a social worker. I started a course, but then I had to go out and find work [but]...I don't want to be doing retail for the rest of my life. I've always wanted to be a social worker. Eventually, I will do that. I'm just trying to work as much as possible and save so I'm able to do that.

#### Female, 24

Like one of the better managers that I've had...And he really does seem to care about me as a person as well as an employee... and wants to promote diversity... Inclusion is a big part of why I want to stay.

#### Male, 24

Currently, at the moment, I'm just looking at doing any type of process work, just to make money. But I'm actually looking into getting into dog grooming and getting into the dog grooming courses next year... if I start my own business one day, I only have to deal with who I want to deal with... Yeah. And then I can practice the practices, like how I would treat people, as I wouldn't treat my employees the way half these employers do.

Talking about... scheduling and time, my shifts are pretty good. I can work from seven. But my manager is pretty cool... So the business hours are from 7am to 7pm. So I just have to work eight hours... I can start at like eight or nine 930 and then just finish later on the day. I can take a break if I want, I can just make up for it.. So it's pretty good. I really like that.

#### Male, 21

Yes, I am happy. I do feel like there is a career path there... I had a really close relationship with my manager. She did support me. She did help me out a lot. When it was quiet, she always showed me how to do things...

#### Female, 18

I'm a single mum...The ladies I work with respect my hours, you know, that I have to do Monday to Friday during school hours. Yeah. It's a good team.

#### Female, 24

My dad was fired from his job because of his ADHD getting in the way... so I kind of didn't want to tell people about it [my mental health]. But because I'm in a very understanding work environment when it comes to mental health and self-care, it's much easier to talk about.

#### Non-binary, 23

I'm quite a weird person... But no one [at work] really thinks that... they just still treat me the same as everyone else... And managers, are actually really great... Having the managers communicate some things to me gives me the information that I need. It makes me really comfortable.

#### Male, 19

# A call for action

Young workers in Western Sydney encounter important material and emotional obstacles in their journey into the workforce and becoming financially independent. They themselves, however, indicate that it would not be that hard for work environments to be made favourable to them, instead of hostile and demeaning. Three easy first steps should be considered by employers:



# 1. Acknowledging the whole person

This includes workplaces offering flexible schedules and understanding environments so young workers are able to better manage their responsibilities and conditions. This includes employers' awareness of the prevalence of mental health issues for young people and how this should be normalised in the workplace.

...it would be really nice if workplaces could have even just a baseline knowledge of mental health and what that can look like

Non-binary, 23



### 2. Investing in training

This includes orientation to the workplace programs, but also structured and ad hoc ongoing support, delivered by experienced colleagues and workplace mentors. In parallel, it is important that employers adjust their expectations as novice workers often need more time and practice to master new skills and unfamiliar tasks.

I think training... if a company's happy to provide that for me, I'd be more than happy to do that...that's very attractive...if a company said, 'you know, we want you to do this training, it will be good for you in the role you're in now and help you in the future', then for me, I would always say yes to something like that.

Male, 21



# 3. Offering career paths

This includes young people given the chance to show what they are capable of instead of being seen as expendable or a source of cheap labour. Also, it entails employers providing opportunities that will help young people develop a solid employment track record, as well as potential career paths made visible to them.

I just feel like, it could be potentially a place where I can really develop a career, because it is a large organization, and I'm sure there's lots of different facets to the organisation that I can learn about (...) I can make more meaningful impact, and meaningful changes.

Male, 24

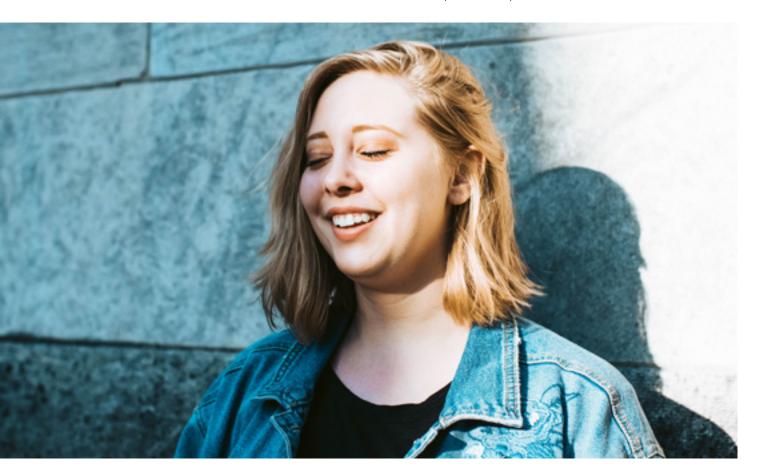
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Social Ventures Australia Brisbane | Darwin | Melbourne | Perth | Sydney | ABN 94 100 487 572 | AFSL 428 865 info@socialventures.com.au | @Social\_Ventures

