

## Submission to the Department of Labour on Quality Flexible Work

- **As a national student's association representative, I strongly believe that flexible working hours will benefit all students, particularly female students and those with family responsibilities.**
- **Flexible working hours benefits employees, employers, families, the community and the country.**
- **I support legislation as the best approach to help employees achieve quality flexible work and also meet the needs of businesses.**

### Introduction

This submission is written on behalf of the Tertiary Women's Focus Group, the women's caucus of the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations. We represent female students at 13 universities and polytechnics around the country. We have a formal policy motion supporting the introduction of Flexible Working Hours and that the enshrining of the right to request flexible hours in legislation. We strongly believe that flexible working hours will benefit female students both while they are studying, and once they leave the workforce. This submission will focus predominantly on the benefits of flexible working hours for students while they are still studying.

### Flexible working hours are good for students

Our knowledge economy demands continuing education throughout our working lives. Flexible working arrangements would therefore benefit both full and part time students. Workers needing to up-skill or retrain would be able to arrange their study around work, and full time students could organise their work around classes, assignments and family commitments. Student debt – currently around \$8.7 billion – is growing, and access to quality flexible working hours would benefit students greatly. Not only would flexible hours make it easier for students to find work, but it would be an incentive for students to do so.

Many students do already work to cover their weekly expenditure, in addition to borrowing from the government, again because of lack of access to allowances and high living costs. Only about a third of students actually receive any form of allowance. The 2004 NZUSA/TNS Income and Expenditure survey of almost 10,000 students nationwide, showed that the incidence of students employed in work while studying in New Zealand has increased significantly in recent years.

- 67 percent of all respondents were employed in regular work during term time. This figure has increased from 41 percent since the 2001 survey.
- Relative to those who participated in the survey, 52 percent of female respondents indicated that they had a regular part-time or full-time job during term time, while the figure for male respondents was 47 percent.
- 26 percent of both female and male respondents indicated that they had casual work during term time.
- On average students work 13 hours a week in paid employment.

The current user-pays tertiary education system discourages women from training in particular areas or from re-entering study because of the high fees and lack of access to allowances and part-time scholarships. Courses with high fees also tend to be in traditionally female areas of study. NZUSA research shows that on average, students that come from a lower socio-economic background choose courses that have lower fees (or are shorter courses). This indicates that their ability to pay back their loan and their resistance to incurring debt is a factor on choosing their study and effectively limits their educational options. Being able to request and receive flexible working hours around classes would allow these women to work and study, in order to keep their student debt to a minimum. This would in turn encourage students to embark on further study at a post-graduate level.

In addition, many students, particularly women, juggle study with family responsibilities. For example, in the NZUSA/TNS survey, 18.6 percent of female students and 9 percent of male students had dependent children. Many do this without the support of family or a partner. In 2003 NZUSA surveyed student parents to find out their main concerns. One respondent said: *"Finding money to pay crèche fees is extremely difficult even with the government funded childcare subsidy it's hugely expensive (but of a high quality)"*. Another said: *"Time - extra time is needed to complete assignments, preparation exercises and readings, above the hours required to be at lectures and tutorials. Time is then required to do the day to day chores involved in running a home and raising a child."* Students with dependent children are struggling to find time to study and care for their children, without the added concern of fitting work around these activities. If flexible hours were available, fitting work around these other activities would not be so problematic, and student parents would be less worried about their household bills.

In relation to tertiary education course assessment, there has been a move away from solely summative assessment in the last two decades, such as exams at the end of the course, and shift towards internal assessment. The result has been that an increasing amount of non-contact time for students is now spent on internal assessment work. Therefore, more flexible working hours would provide students with an opportunity to address their course work requirements, while at the same time being able to gain some income to meet the increasingly high cost of living - in a climate of very low student allowance eligibility.

The average age of tertiary students is currently 28 years old, which means they are more likely to have children or other dependants than in the past. Fees and course costs for tertiary study are on the rise, and access to allowances is poor. These factors all result in students being pressured to take out huge student loans to cover not only their fees and course costs, but their daily expenses such as food and rent. Many students now work to alleviate the burden of debt, but finding regular quality work that fits in around lectures, labs, tutorials and assessment is often difficult. Students need flexible working hours because they can better fit in their work around study and family responsibilities, and work towards a positive work-study-life balance.

#### **Flexible working hours are good for everyone:**

- New Zealand's long working hours culture creates stress and inconvenience to many employees, making it hard to juggle work with other responsibilities, such as the care of children and elderly dependents. Flexible working hours enable employees to manage these responsibilities.

- Flexible working hours are not just good for families. Having flexible working hours enables older workers to participate in the workforce, students to manage work and study and employees to be more involved in community and voluntary activities. It will reduce peak hour transport congestion.
- Surveys show more flexible working arrangements are good for employers too, leading to increased productivity and morale and reduced absenteeism and staff turnover.

### **Our preferred option is legislation**

I support the legislation presently before Parliament, in the form of a private member's bill by Green MP Sue Kedgley, with the provisions extended to cover all employees. This is the Employment Relations (Flexible Working Hours) Amendment Bill, which is mentioned on p.14 of the DOL discussion document in footnote 16.

The work situation for many students is casual, with varying hours or rosters each week. Students often do not want to "rock the boat" or jeopardise their work situation by asking for extra time off if they need it to study or do assignments. Legislation will change the environment in which they work and give them greater job security by giving them the legal right to request flexible hours. They know they can ask and will have their request reasonably considered by even the toughest boss – and that specific reasons must be given in order to turn down the request. The due process that the legislation would set out for considering requests is crucial to making flexible hours work.

To conclude, only legislation will ensure that every employee has a right, enshrined in law, to request to work flexibly and employers are required by law to take any such request seriously seek to accommodate it in a workplace.

Thank you for considering this submission.

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