

# **DOES THE STRESS CAUSED FROM ASSESSMENT PRACTICES NEGATIVELY IMPACT ON TEEN WELLBEING?**

Community & Family Studies IRP

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I would like to thank the large amount of students who took their time to complete a survey on youth wellbeing under the topic of school assessment practices and to the students who permitted me to conduct an interview on. Honest and reflective responses were given which allowed me to discover many intriguing factors about my topic in full depth.

Lastly, thank you to the Boredofstudies website and the students that utilise it for granting access to past Independent Research Projects. This assisted me in coming up with several ideas for an IRP topic as well as displaying what to include in different sections of the project in addition to the overall structure of the IRP.

# Rationale

This Independent Research Project investigates the hypothesis “The stress caused from assessment practices negatively impact on teen wellbeing?”. The project aims to go into depth on the social, physical and emotional aspects of students and their wellbeing during the six years of high school they undertake. It is an extremely important topic to look at as it is already found that the amount of stress high school students suffer from and the mental conditions and illnesses it leads to, is significant for high school students.

The purpose of this Independent Research project is to explore how the stress caused from assessment practices impact on the wellbeing of students and their families, why students are assessed and how to best deal with stress in schools. The focus of this project relates to the 3 syllabus areas: individuals, groups and families.

# Literature Review

For the purpose of this Independent Research Project, these definitions will be used:

- Stress – a state of emotional tension as a result of demanding circumstances
- Wellbeing – the level of satisfaction an individual experiences when their needs are met, influenced by the social, physical, emotional, economic, cultural and spiritual aspects of the individual
- Assessment – methods used to evaluate the academic progress and educational needs of students

High school students all over Australia receive assessments from their very first year right up until their last. Assessments that allow teachers and schools to compare their students based on their academic progress and make students compete. This causes students to suffer from stress which also leads to other harmful mental health conditions. A portrayal of this is shown in the following 5 sources of secondary research data. Along with this, one of the articles highlight how countries like Finland outperform all other educational systems in the world even with their minimal assessment practice on their students.

A recent article dated in 2016 by the author Lucy Clark, discusses “How the education system is making kids stressed and sick”. It claims that the Australian educational system is focused on achieving better outcomes rather than getting students to love and enjoy learning. The pressure placed on students as they are expected to achieve high levels of academic success dominates the wonders and joys entailed in learning; making them feel anxious and stressed; impacting on their emotional wellbeing. It is stated that “with standardised testing, ranking, comparison and competition, a disturbing number of

students suffer from depression and anxiety”. Along with this, “26% of students drop out of school and many others lose their adolescence to stress and mental illness”. This is a perfect example of how the educational system, in which consists of conducting assessments, negatively affects a student’s emotional and physical state of wellbeing.

The article highlights how Finland’s educational system outperforms every other system in the world. In Finland, testing is insignificant and there is no competition and comparison between students and yet, they do exceptionally well in academic outcomes. The Finns go out of their way in order to prevent students from feeling anxious about school. They value the whole student, not only the small academic parts of their students. So does constant testing and causing stress for students in order to do well really necessary?

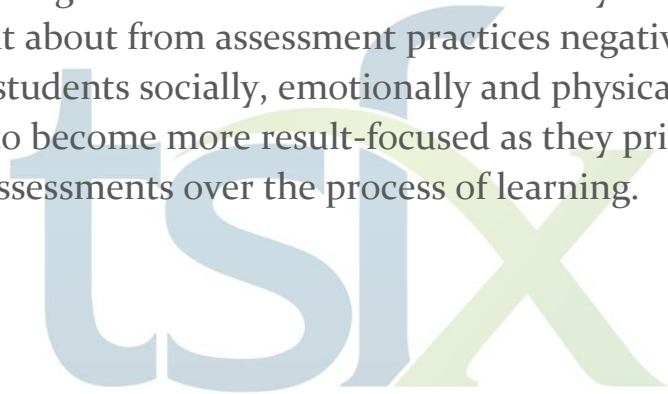
In addition, a you tube video from 2016 with up to 3 million views showcases a man (Prince EA) presenting a case of ‘educational malpractice’. He desires to create a better future of learning for students as “while students are only 20% of our population, they are 100% of our future”. He discusses how the educational system makes students think they are stupid, useless and unable to find their gifts. As this lowers the self-esteem and self-confidence of students, it significantly affects their wellbeing in a negative way. Referring to the education system, it is stated that “they think bubbling in a multiple choice question will determine success”. This highlights how assessment practices fix a very narrow vision of success and that the system is more concerned about the academic outcomes rather than how much of an impact assessment practices have on the wellbeing of students. Overall, this source emphasises the pressure students tolerate, how they are never entirely valued and how education truly makes them feel as they compete and are compared against other students.



Moreover, from 2013 is a newspaper article by Helen Gregory titled “Stress on HSC students underestimated” in which reviews how distressed students are about their year 12 examinations. It is expressed that “stress around the HSC comes from expectations about the outcome”. This links with the first article where the pressure placed on students due to the expectations of high level achievements overrides the love of learning. This conveys that students are now raised to care more about the outcome rather than what they actually learn. Along with this, the article states the effects of stress due to assessments, year 12 students suffer from, which include: sleeping problems, drinking and taking drugs, becoming isolated, not turning up to school and performing poorly when they used to perform well. Each one of these effects negatively impact on a student’s wellbeing. Experiencing sleeping problems, drugs and drinking are extremely harmful to the physical wellbeing. Becoming isolated is a big factor in which damagingly affects the social wellbeing of an individual also leading to a negative impact on their emotional wellbeing which is seen through self-harming. Overall, the impacts of stress caused by assessment practices lead the wellbeing of students to be at risk.

A recent you tube video from 2013 called “HSC – High Stress Conclusion” composed by JimmyJo Studios lists statistics on the harmful effects of the pressure and stress revolved around year 12. It is stated that “pressure to perform in the HSC contributes to 1 in 11 adolescence suicides in NSW”. As well as this, “More than 40% of students suffer clinical anxiety”, “60% feel overwhelming levels of stress” and “In Victoria, a student attempts suicide each week during the school year”. This demonstrates the disturbing and startling results of stress caused from assessment tasks not just for one student, but for an immense number of students all over Australia.

Similarly, a newspaper article from AAP (Australian Associated Press) titled “Year 12 students ‘at risk of stress’” from 2006 discusses the statistics on the effects of year 12 pressures. It is identified that “1 in 5 year 12 students have thought about killing or hurting themselves due to year 12 pressures”. Along with this, “Out of 941 Victorian students surveyed, 19% had thought of suicide/self-harm, 33% were severely depressed and 41% suffered from anxiety”. These are large numbers and devastating results in which underline the severity of assessment tasks throughout the year 12 school year. It is also stated that “those who felt disconnected from family and friends were most at risk”. This comes under the social wellbeing of individuals, without the interaction with others is harmful for the social wellbeing of an individual leaving them to feel isolated and solitary. Ultimately, the stress brought about from assessment practices negatively affect the wellbeing of students socially, emotionally and physically as well as builds them to become more result-focused as they prioritise the outcome of assessments over the process of learning.





# Methodology

In order to stick to ethical research principles, the privacy of participants was maintained by ensuring the anonymity as personal information was not made available and was kept confidential. Along with this, the rights of people to decide whether or not to participate was respected. In addition, all pieces of data collected were accurately documented and documents were maintained truthfully without any data altered as well as included in a bibliography; ensuring the validity of the project. In order to avoid bias, effective research methods were selected, an appropriate representative sample group was chosen and results were interpreted as they appeared rather than as desired.

The primary research consists of a structured interview and a survey. A structured interview as a methodology was used as it goes into a great deal of depth during the course of a particular topic. It was conducted on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November, on 3 random high school students from each stage: stages 4, 5 and 6. This was achieved through the method of simple random sampling which is choosing participants in such a way that each person has an equal chance of being selected. This was done in order to grasp an overall viewpoint of the stress involved with assessment tasks from various year groups to determine whether a particular stage experiences more or less stress than another.

The questions in the interview focus on the impacts of stress and how it may affect a student's wellbeing whether it is socially, physically and/or emotionally. The information obtained included the opinions of respondents as well as alternate responses. Thus, both qualitative and quantitative data was achieved. As a number of individuals were interviewed, the results were compared in which additionally provided quantitative data.

The second methodology selected was a questionnaire consisting of 74 open and closed ended questions. It gathered a series of quantitative and qualitative data. A traditional pen and paper survey was handed out to 72 male and female students between the ages of 11 and 18 in a Western Sydney High School. Distribution of the survey was done in person on November 2016. Respondents were randomly selected to be reflective of the population of the school. Students were only identified by their age group and gender to ensure privacy and allow for honest responses from the participants. The length of the survey proved problematic as many respondents did not get to the final questions, however still a large amount of valuable data was gathered.

By completing adequate reading of secondary sources on this topic, having more than one research methodology and developing a good understanding of research methodologies ensured the validity of the results for this project.

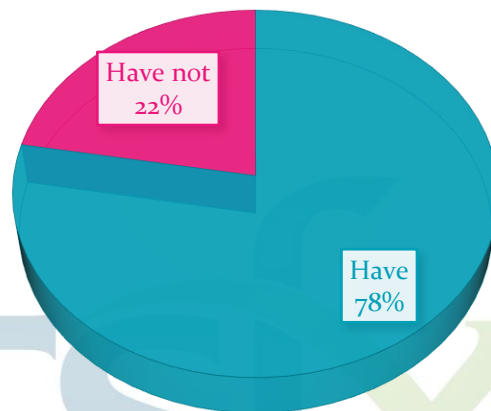


# Results

## Structured Interview Results -

Question 1)

### AMOUNT OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE SUFFERED FROM STRESS THROUGHOUT HIGHSCHOOL

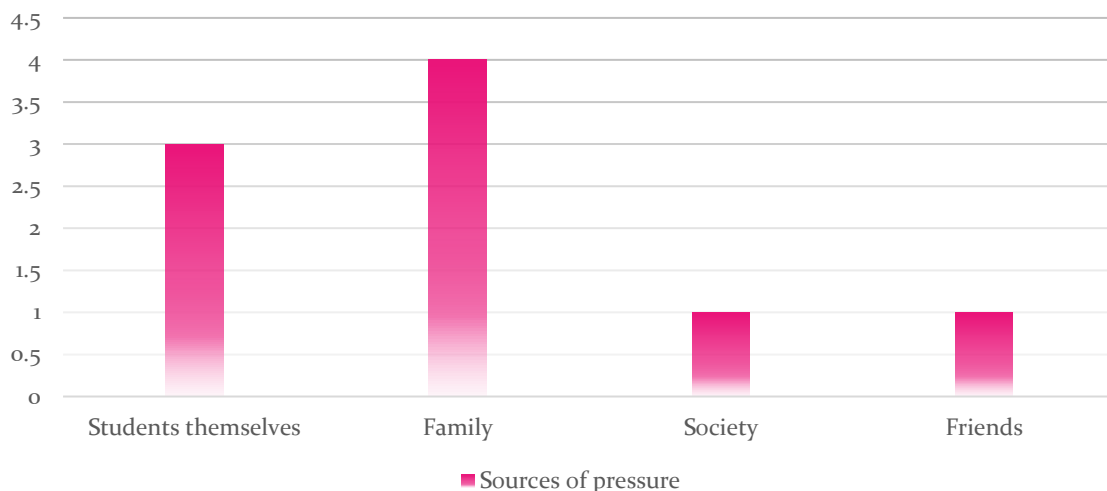


#1 Stressful aspects of school:

- Too many assignments
- Pressure to achieve high marks
- Ranks
- Striving to come first & being at the 'top'

Question 2)

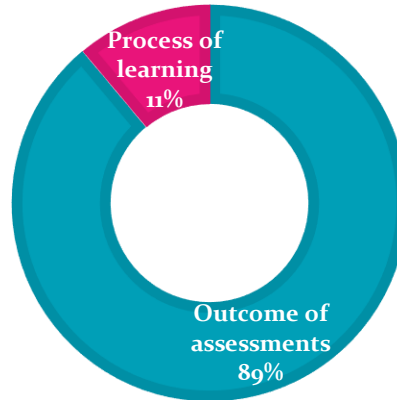
### SOURCES OF PRESSURE TO PERFORM FROM



Question 3)

### STUDENT PRIORITIES

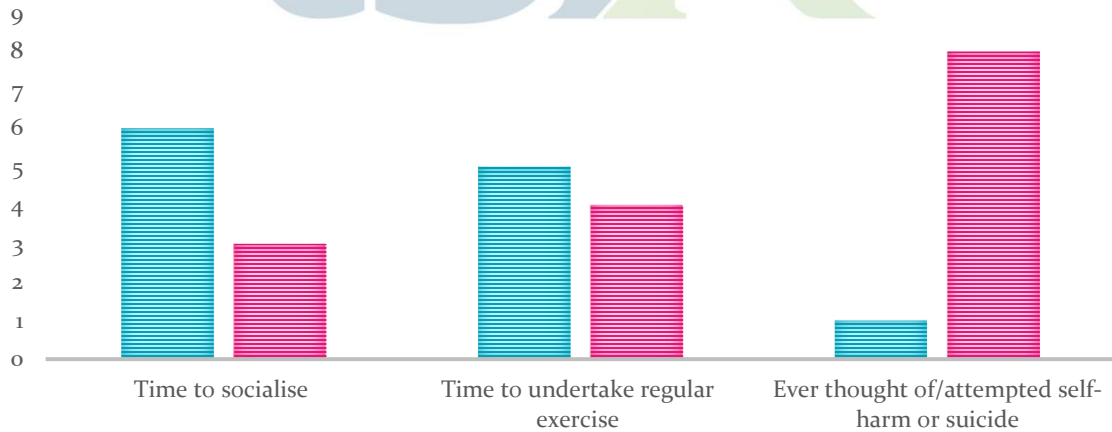
■ Outcome of assessments    ■ Process of learning



Question 4, 5 & 6)

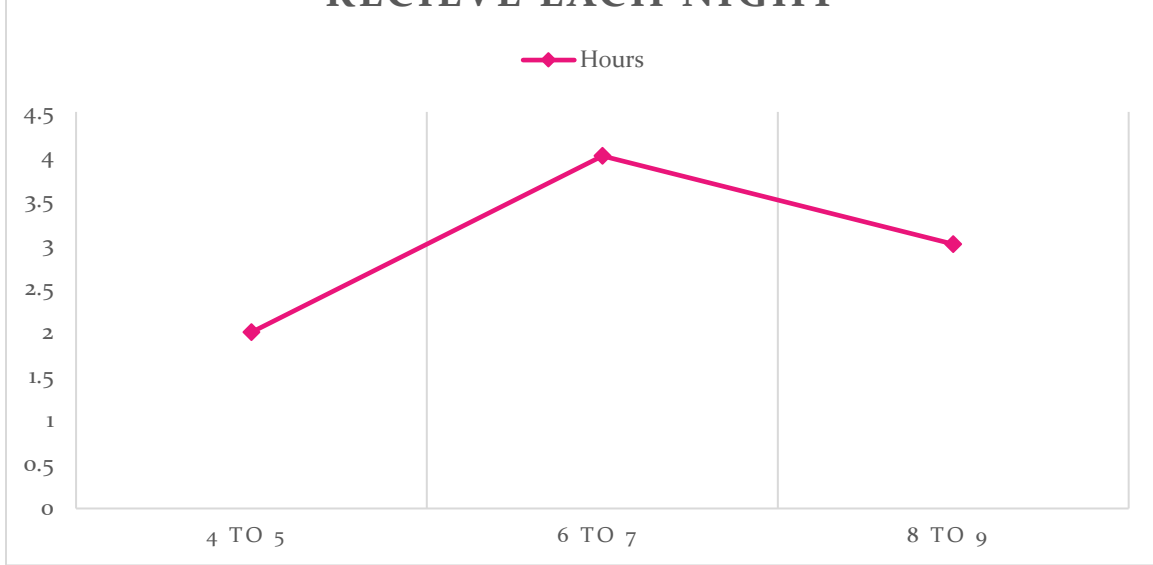
### SOCIAL, PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF STUDENTS

■ Yes    ■ No

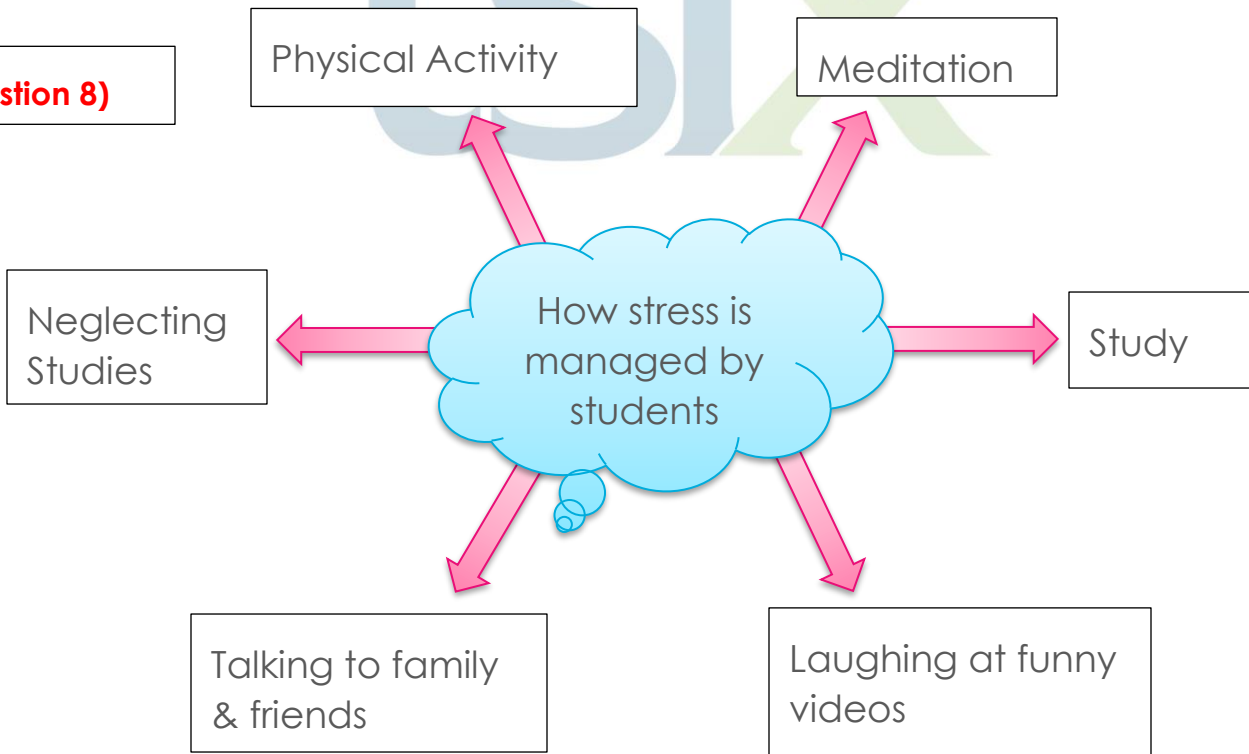


**Question 7)**

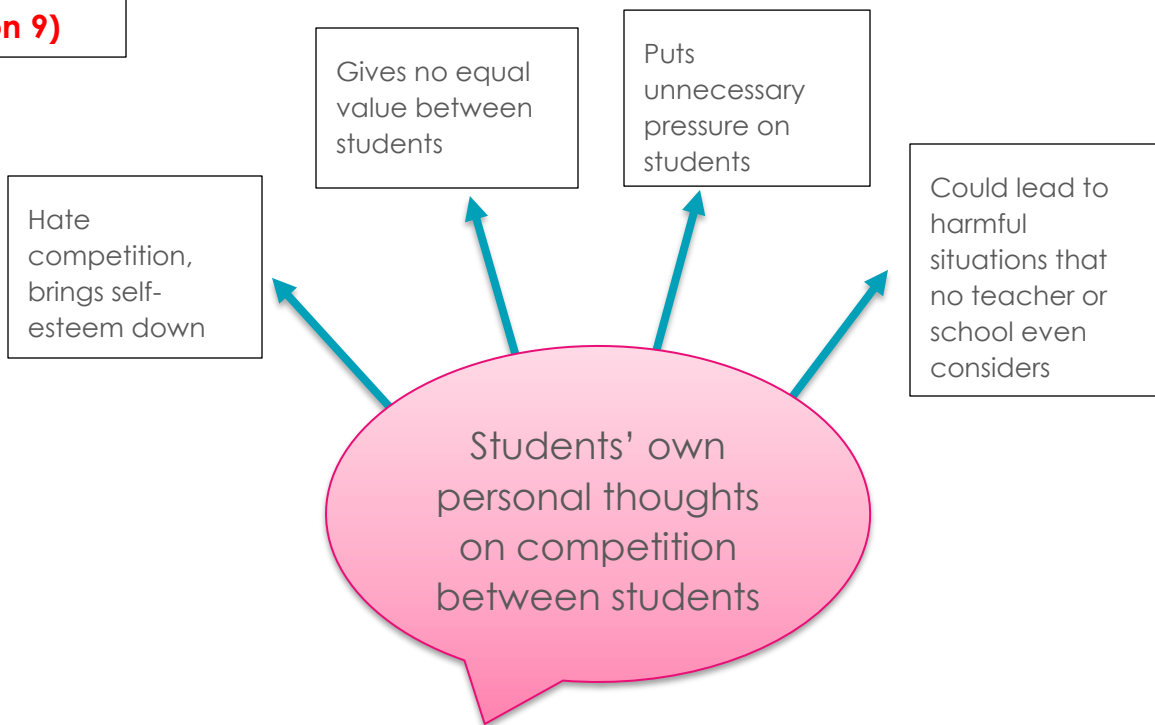
**APPROX. HOURS OF SLEEP STUDENTS RECIEVE EACH NIGHT**



**Question 8)**

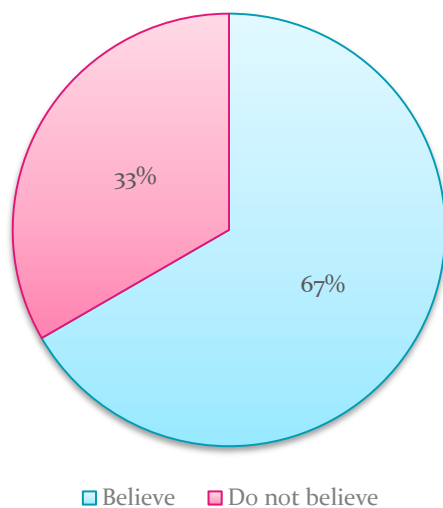


**Question 9)**



**Question 10)**

THE AMOUNT OF STUDENTS WHO BELIEVE YEAR 12 DETERMINES THEIR FUTURE



**Influences:**

**YES:**

- Parents/family
- The ATAR is important; a great opportunity and faster pathway to get accepted in a university.

**NO:**

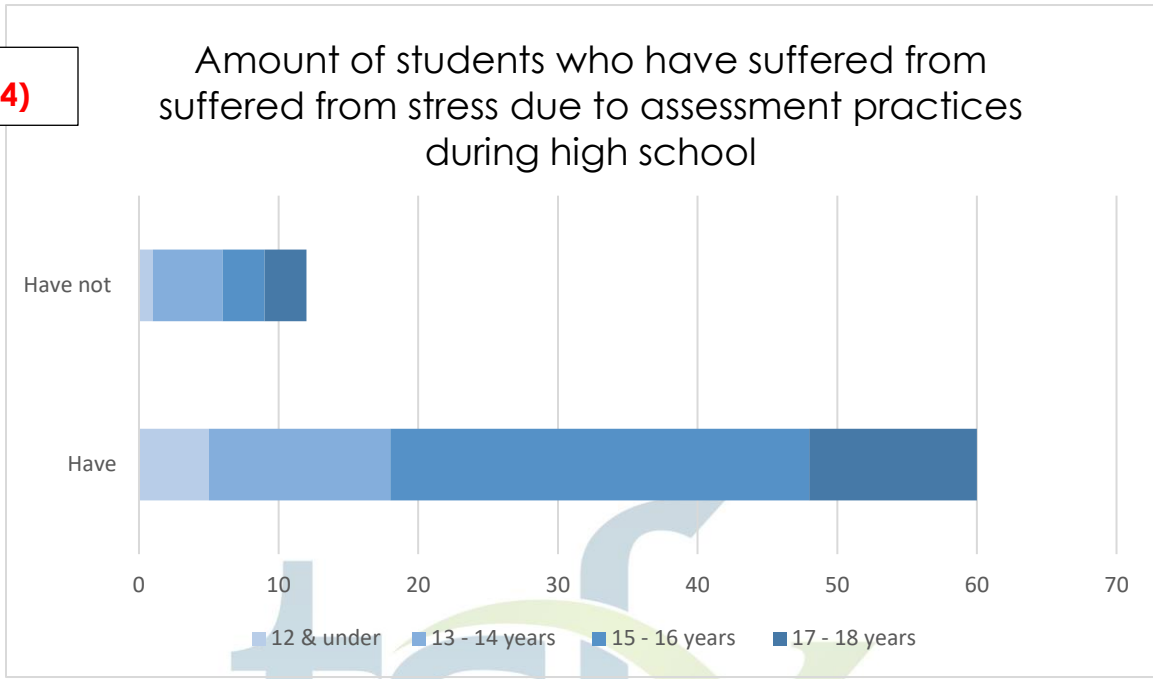
- There are alternative ways to do what an individual wants
- Other plans; TAFE/ full time work



## Questionnaire Results-

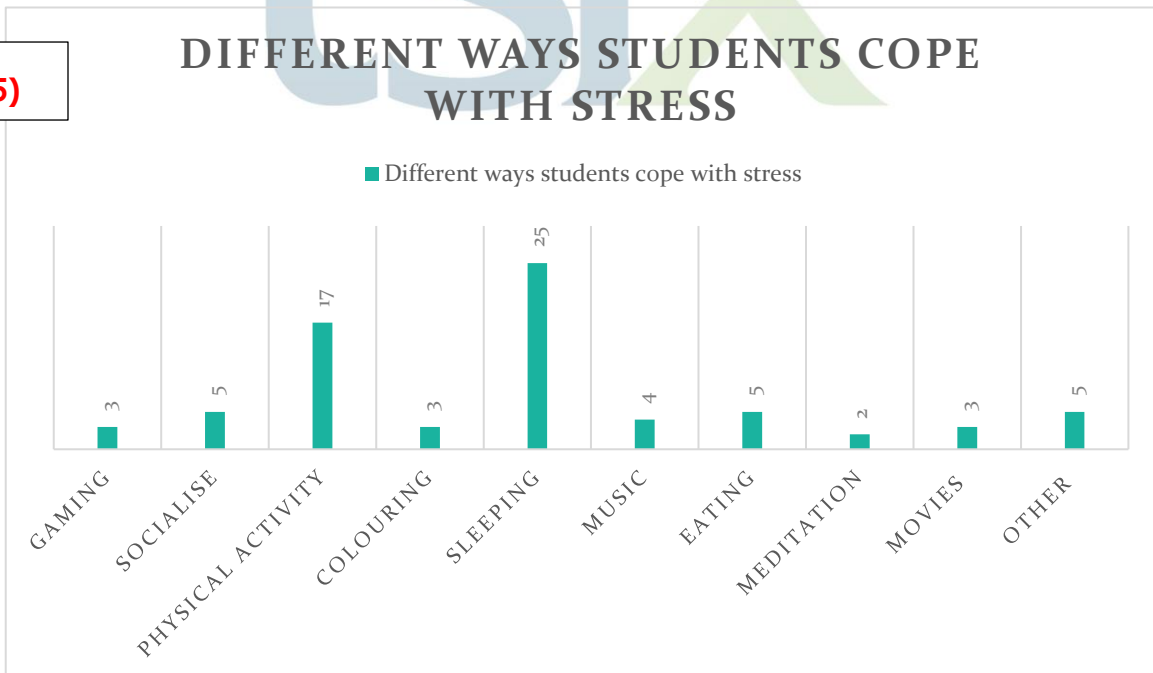
### Question 64)

Amount of students who have suffered from stress due to assessment practices during high school



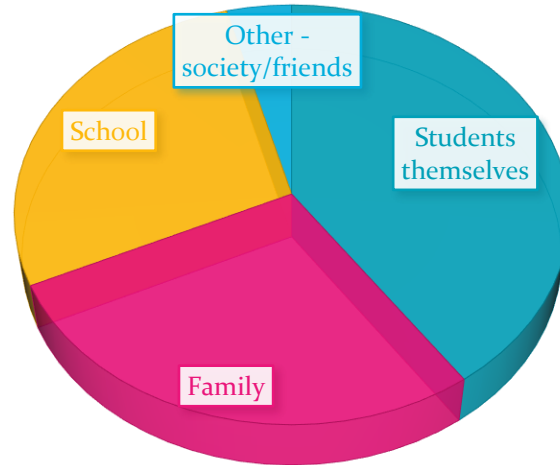
### Question 65)

## DIFFERENT WAYS STUDENTS COPE WITH STRESS



Question 66)

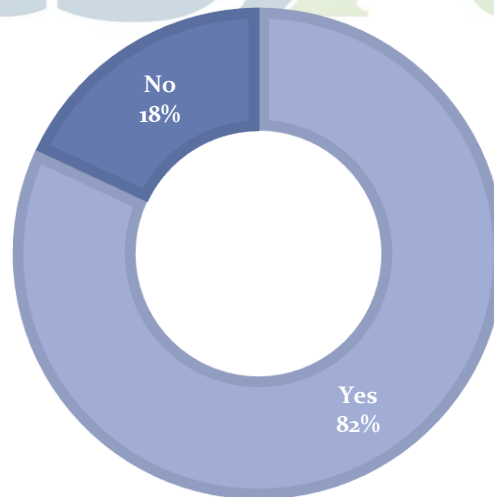
## SOURCES OF PRESSURE STUDENTS PERFORM FROM



Question 67)

## DO STUDENTS FIND THE TIME TO SOCIALISE?

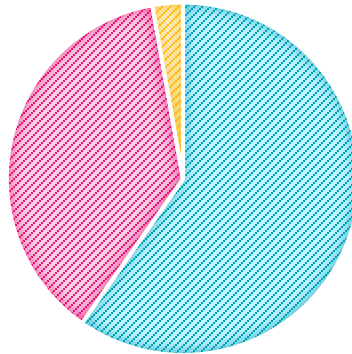
■ Yes ■ No



**Question 68)**

## DO STUDENTS BELIEVE YEAR 12/HSC WILL DETERMINE THEIR FUTURE?

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ Maybe



Reasons for

Yes	No	Maybe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Able to get into university quickly</li> <li>○ Don't want a slow future</li> <li>○ Pressure from parents; reinforced by parents' values</li> <li>○ "Easiest way"</li> <li>○ Will have a better career which will lead to a better future</li> <li>○ ATAR is important</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Alternative ways to do what one wants</li> <li>○ Chance to change anytime</li> <li>○ Other pathways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Depends on decisions made</li> </ul>

# Analysis & Discussion

The majority of results obtained from this research project support the hypothesis “the stress caused from assessment practices negatively impacts on teen wellbeing”. The primary research undertaken along with secondary research from the literature review demonstrate how the stress and pressure caused from assessment practices harmfully affect a number of students on a social, physical and emotional level of wellbeing.

It was an expectation that there would be many students who suffered from stress due to assessment practices during high school as it is something that is seen and heard everyday through the observation of students and due to its portrayal in the secondary research. It was also expected that the most pressure to perform from would be the students themselves and their families as this is quite normal across many distinct cultures, especially in families that have migrated to Australia. Parents from different backgrounds, coming from developing countries desire a better future for their children and appreciate the many opportunities in developed countries like Australia. This isn't necessarily a 'bad' thing, however, the expectations placed on children by family due to these reasons lead to stress and pressure which also further allows children to set expectations on themselves.

In addition, 8 out of the 9 students interviewed prioritise the outcome of assessments over the process of learning. This is the shocking impact the education system has had on students where students care more about the marks they achieve rather than actually having an interest in the content; increasing the amount of stress placed on students. This correlates with the article “How the education system is making kids stressed and sick” from the literature review as it claims that the ‘Australian educational system is focused on achieving better outcomes rather than getting students to love and enjoy learning’

along with 'stress around the HSC comes from expectations about the outcome'. This statement has been proven through primary research.

It was surprising to see that there were many students still had the time to socialise even though there were a large amount of students who stated they experience stress. However, a thought added to this questions whether students interpreted socialising as in a face-to-face conversation or the socialising that happens over the internet through several social network sites. However, there were a few students who stated that they were not able to find the time to socialise due to assessments and therefore, stress caused from assessments negatively impacts on the social wellbeing on some students.

Even though there were more students that found time to engage in regular exercise, some students (particularly students in year 12) did however mention that the workload they receive from school makes it hard for them to find time and hence, negatively affects the physical wellbeing of some students. Only 1 out of the 9 students interviewed had ever thought of or attempted self-harm/suicide due to assessments. This is a great thing however contrasts with the data collected in source 4 from the literature review where it is stated that "In Victoria, a student attempts suicide every week during the school year". The results for this may have turned out differently due to the small sample group.

Studies show that teenagers need up to 9 hours of sleep yet according to the interview results, most students only get about 6-7 hours of sleep. This is due to a number of reasons such as procrastination, distractions, fatigue and stress leading up to piles of work where students tend to utilise the time they need to sleep, to catch up on work and study. This highlights how assessment practices negatively impact on the physical wellbeing of students.

The majority of students that have suffered from stress during high school come under the age bracket of 15 – 16 years. This is not a surprise as students in this age bracket are mostly year 10, 11 or 12 students. This shows that these are the years where the workload begins to suddenly increase. This is unhealthy for students physically and emotionally. The normal routine of students begins to change, sleeping patterns begin to shift and overall, a large amount of pressure is unexpectedly placed on students.

In question 65 of the survey, sleeping was the most common way for students to cope with stress. Is this healthy? Research on The Huffington Post by Rosie Osman has shown that “too much sleep on a regular basis can increase the risk of diabetes, heart disease, obesity and mental health conditions such as depression. This harmfully affects a student’s wellbeing both physically and emotionally. On a side note, other ways such as meditation, physical activity and colouring in are great ways of dealing with stress.

Every student interviewed was questioned on their own personal thoughts on competition held between students where qualitative data was achieved. Responses such as “It brings self-esteem down”, “gives no equal value between students”, “puts unnecessary pressure on students” as well as “could lead to harmful situations” all display how competition and ranks truly make students feel. Each and every student is unique with different strengths and weaknesses. There are several students that experience stress and work extremely hard, still not able to achieve very high marks; which is never recognised by schools or teachers. This ultimately leads to low self-esteem and low self-confidence which in the end destructively impacts on the emotional wellbeing of students.



Responses received from question 10 of the interview and question 68 from the survey were greatly similar. In both responses, there were a lot more students who believed that their year 12/HSC year would affect and determine what their future would look like. This was influenced by factors including family values; pressure from parents, the thought of a faster way to get into university as well as a guide to a better career and future. These thoughts, values and beliefs essentially add a lot more pressure and stress on students as they believe they have no future without doing well at school.



# Summary & Conclusion

To conclude this Independent Research Project, it has been proven that the hypothesis "The stress caused from assessment practices negatively impacts on teen wellbeing" is in fact true. The wellbeing of countless students (teenagers) is at risk socially, physically and emotionally due to the stress triggered from assessment practices and this is explored in both primary and secondary research.

The secondary research concluded in saying that:

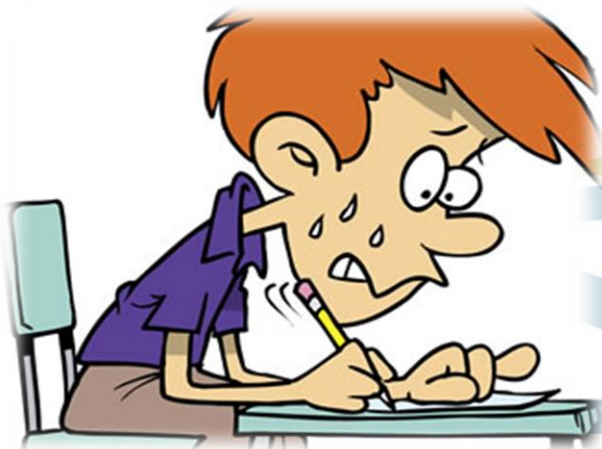
- A countless number of students suffer from depression and anxiety due to standardized testing, ranking and competition.
- Students truly feel stupid, useless and unable to find their gifts as they compete and are compared against other students.
- Students are raised to care more about the outcome rather than what they actually learn.
- Stress brought about from assessment practices negatively affect students physically, socially and emotionally as well as builds them to become more result-focused.

The primary research conducted through the methodology of an interview and survey proved these statements to be true. A number of students responded to a variety of questions revolving around these areas of stress and the majority of results received supported these statements. It is evident in the primary research that:

- There are numerous students who have suffered from stress throughout high school due to assessment practices
- Students believe that competition gives no equal value between students, brings self-esteem down and adds unnecessary pressure on students.
- Majority of students prioritise the outcome of assessments over the process of learning.
- Most students don't receive enough sleep due to stress.

- Several students believe that their HSC will determine their future.

It is strongly suggested that teachers should take part in organising events to relieve students from stress as this would be extremely beneficial. Along with this, schools should value all students no matter how academic a student is or not; every student should be commended on their achievements and improvements not only the high achievers. The value of content covered in different subjects should start to be reinforced more than the importance of marks as this would play a great role in reducing stress for students.



# Bibliography

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-17/beautiful-failures-education-making-kids-sick/7589084> - source 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqTTojTija8> – source 2

<http://www.theherald.com.au/story/1838025/stress-on-hsc-students-underestimated/> - source 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dTnBvwzvjI> – source 4

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Year-12-students-at-risk-of-stress/2006/04/16/1145125991572.html> - source 5

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rosie-osmun/oversleeping-the-effects-and-health-risks-of-sleeping-too-much\\_b\\_9092982.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rosie-osmun/oversleeping-the-effects-and-health-risks-of-sleeping-too-much_b_9092982.html)



# Appendix

## IRP Structured Interview -

- 1) Have you ever suffered from stress throughout high school? If yes, what is the number one aspect of school that stresses you out?
- 2) From who do you feel the most pressure to perform from?  
E.g. – yourself, family, school
- 3) What do you prioritise more; the outcome of assessments or the process of learning?  
Why is this? \_\_\_\_
- 4) Do you still find the time to socialize? Yes/no
- 5) Do you undertake regular exercise? Yes/no
- 6) Have you ever thought of/ attempted suicide or self-harm due to assessments? Yes/no
- 7) How much sleep do you usually get every night? \_\_\_\_  
Why is this?
- 8) How do you manage stress?  
E.g. – sleeping, meditation, exercise, colouring in, neglecting studies, N/A
- 9) What are your personal thoughts on competing and being compared against other students?
- 10) Do you believe high school/year 12 determines your future? Yes/no  
What influences this belief?

\*The responses to these were voice recorded on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, 2016 and viewed by Mrs. Powell on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2016.

## Youth Wellbeing Survey for Year 12 CAFS 2016

Please circle your answers

1. Age bracket

12 and under

13-14yrs

15-16yrs

17-18yrs

### School Assessment Practices

64) Have you suffered from stress due to assessments throughout high school?

Yes / No

65) How do you deal with stress? sleeping/physical activity/ colouring  
in/meditation/other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

66) From who do you feel the most pressure to perform from? Yourself /  
family/ school/ other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

67) Do you find the time to socialise? Yes / No

68) Do you believe year 12 will determine your future? explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_