



DR JOHN BUCHANAN

THE CHANGING world of work

From long working hours to labour shortages, the Faculty's Workplace Research Centre provides practical insights into the most pressing issues facing the Australian workplace

"FOR MANY OF us, work takes up the best hours of the day and the best years of our life," says Dr John Buchanan, who heads the multidisciplinary team of researchers at the Workplace Research Centre in the Faculty of Economics and Business.

"Our research is devoted to looking at how this important part of people's existence is changing in order to help employers, unions and government figure out ways of managing that change process more efficiently and fairly."

A key focus of the Workplace Research Centre is providing commissioned studies on all aspects of work for a diverse list of clients including the Reserve Bank of Australia, Unions NSW and the NSW Council of Social Service. The team also runs training and conferences to share their findings with the wider community and raise the level of public understanding about complex and controversial issues such as *Work Choices*.

Its flagship project is the Australia at Work study, a major research effort that is tracking 8,300 workers over five years. It was this project that thrust

the Centre onto the front page of the nation's newspapers last year when the research team was disparaged by then Prime Minister John Howard and two of his senior ministers.

"Our interest is in generating evidence, not controversy," says Dr Buchanan, who came to the Centre from the Commonwealth public service where he was part of the team that undertook the first Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey. "The results of our study did not accord with what the Government was saying about how the IR system was evolving. But ABS data at the time verified what we found, as has all the data that has come out subsequently."

Another area where the Centre is making an important contribution is the question of skill shortages in Australia. The team's research has identified the need to move beyond a focus on training and instead look at the broad settings in which work skills are developed and used. "We need to look at the whole system of work to grapple with the problem of labour shortages," the scholar explains.

He gives the example of the NSW racing industry, which had been

having difficulty finding training track riders to ride horses at four o'clock in the morning. When researchers from the Centre investigated, they found that the problem was not a skill shortage, as had initially been thought, but was related to the wider context of the job. "On closer scrutiny, the problem turned out to be that the job was only casual work paid at a low rate, and there weren't sufficient hours available to deliver the riders a living wage," Dr Buchanan says. To remedy the problem, the racecourse took the responsibility for creating whole jobs for the training riders – for example, by enabling them to train horses in the morning and do gardening work later in the day to bring their hours up.

The Centre is proud of its role in providing practical insights and formulating policy implications for its clients, often encouraging people to think differently about the world of work. "We don't have the magic bullet," the Director says. "Our role is helping parties get to a point where they are asking and answering the right questions."

The Workplace Research Centre (WRC) is located in the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Sydney. For more information, please visit its website at www.wrc.org.au.