



Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research  
The Australian National University

Education, Training and Indigenous Futures  
CAEPR Policy Research: 1990-2007

## Research Summaries

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## Reference No. 10

Summarising: Arthur (1999), *Careers, aspirations and the meaning of work in remote Torres Strait*

Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990-2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

The MCEETYA report and associated research summaries are available at <[www.anu.edu.au/caepr/education.php](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/education.php)>.

**Title of Research:**

Careers, aspirations and the meaning of work in remote Torres Strait

**Research Publication:**

CAEPR Discussion Paper 190/1999

<[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/1999\\_DP190.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/1999_DP190.pdf)>

**Name of Researcher(s):**

W.S. Arthur

**Time period:**

1999

**Geographic location:**

Torres Strait Islands

**Methodology:**

This paper was prepared as a scoping exercise for a longitudinal study of the career aspirations of young Torres Strait islanders over the period 1999–2003 (see related papers below). The paper draws upon the previous local knowledge and experience of the researcher and statistical information from the 1996 Census and other relevant sources.

**Aims:**

This paper aims to provide a research framework for examining the careers and aspirations of young Torres Strait Islanders.

**Selected findings and insights:**

This paper provides a wide range of background information on the demography, labour market and education and training provision for Torres Strait Islanders. Distinctions are drawn between those inhabiting the Inner islands and the Outer islands of the archipelago.

Six primary goals or activities that young Torres Strait Islanders may choose were identified:

- Employment in the formal labour market, tertiary education, CDEP work, unemployment, being outside the labour force (possibly undertaking voluntary work) and migration or relocation for further study, training or employment. Furthermore, people, and especially young people, may undertake several of these activities at once or move randomly between them - for example, moving between CDEP and other employment or between CDEP and unemployment—which may not be consistent with the intent of government policies.

Economic activity was **limited** by a number of factors: a shortage of water and land, a small economic base with few industries, inaccessible islands and a history of out-migration.

- The Inner Islands, notably Thursday Island, had about 60% Indigenous people, were multiracial, had a formal labour market and a very low participation in CDEP. In contrast the Outer Islands had about 90% of Indigenous people, no significant formal labour market and a significant CDEP scheme.
- The capacity to expand the regional economy through expansion of the only major non-service industry, commercial fishing, was limited as also appeared to be the opportunities for expanding the small tourism sector or bringing new industries to the Torres Strait Islands.

A relatively large proportion of the workforce comprised non-Indigenous temporary residents who were living in the Torres Strait for work. For example in 1996, on Thursday Island:

- About the same number of non-Indigenous as Indigenous persons were employed in the **formal labour market**. As a result, Indigenous people were under-represented, in terms of working age population, in those industries such as health, education, construction and transport which make up the formal labour market. Furthermore non-Indigenous workers filled most of the managerial, professional and trades positions. However the paper recognises some progress for Torres Strait Islander females in entering the health and education industries but there was little evidence of males wishing to enter the more managerial, professional or trade positions held by non-Indigenous workers.

The 1996 Census indicates that Torres Strait Islanders were **much less qualified** than non-Indigenous people in the Torres Strait. For example:

- Only 7% of males (15 years and over) and 4.1% of females had 'skilled vocational' qualifications or above, this limiting their participation in the formal labour market.

Casual employment in the **commercial fishing industry** was an inhibiting factor in respect of completing secondary schooling or participating in further education and training. Furthermore, the paper noted that a school-to-work survey had found that many of those who aspired to particular 'skilled' careers did not understand the need for gaining prerequisite skills and therefore participation in training or further education.

Overall the research suggests that there were **few career options** in the Torres Strait and that the impact of the CDEP on people's aspirations was significant, especially when intergenerational participation in the CDEP scheme occurred.

- As a result, the notion of 'careers' may be more transitory in nature, involving moving between different activities and even localities, including temporary or permanently relocating to the Australian mainland.

#### **Educational implications:**

The short term nature of education, training and employment goals and the extent to which young Torres Strait Islanders change their goals challenge existing notions of what constitutes career planning. It also calls for a more flexible approach to education and training provision. [**career counselling**]

The very notion of 'career' in such a remote community will be defined more widely as it needs to take account of the way in which young Torres Strait Islanders interact with their local economy. They often move

between the private (commercial fishing), state (local council services, often through CDEP or government agencies) and the customary economies:

- Each with their own educational and training requirements.

Overall, case studies such as this highlight the important role of education and training in helping young Indigenous people formulate short and long-term career goals and provide them with the necessary skills to achieve those goals, within a culturally sensitive understanding of family and community commitments.

- Flexibility in approach by education and training providers is required to take account of family commitments and, where necessary, re-entry into the workforce or further study when family commitments are less onerous. [pathways]

### Relevance:

Domain 5: *Pathways to education, employment and training*

Student aspirations and key transition points

Influence of CDEP on young people

### Related Papers:

W.S. Arthur and J. David-Petero, 'Job-searching and careers: Young Torres Strait Islanders, 1999', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 205*, 2000.

<[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2000\\_DP205.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2000_DP205.pdf)>

W.S. Arthur and J. David-Petero, 'Career aspirations and orientation to work: Young Torres Strait Islanders, 1999' *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 206*, 2000.

<[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2000\\_DP206.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2000_DP206.pdf)>

W.S. Arthur and J. David-Petero, 'Education, training and careers: Young Torres Strait Islanders, 1999', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 207*, 2000.

<[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2000\\_DP207.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2000_DP207.pdf)>

W.S. Arthur, J.P. Hughes, V. McGrath and V. Wasaga, 'Careers and Aspirations: Young Torres Strait Islanders, 1999-2003', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 259*, 2004.

<[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2004\\_DP259.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2004_DP259.pdf)>