Reference No. 18

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.

Title of Research:
Careers and Aspirations: Young Torres Strait Islanders, 1999–2003

Research Publication:
CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 259/2004

Name of Researcher(s):
W.S. Arthur, J.P. Hughes, V. McGrath and E. Wasaga

Time period:
1999–2003

Geographic location:
Torres Strait

Methodology:
In 1999, 105 Indigenous people aged between 15 and 24 years and with equal numbers of males and females were interviewed about their career aspirations. The sample was also split equally between Thursday Island (representing the Inner islands) and Badu Island (representing the Outer Islands).

They were asked what they were doing in terms of education, training and employment, what they thought they would like to do in the future, what might help them achieve their aims, and what might hinder them.

Some 59 of these people were re-interviewed in 2003 when they were aged between 19 and 28 years. Many of those not able to be interviewed had moved to the Australian mainland or had moved elsewhere to other islands.

Aims:
The purpose of this paper is to report on the experiences of young Torres Strait Islanders over the preceding four years in regard to the achievement of their career aspirations. In particular the paper analyses:

- The factors that helped young Torres Strait Islanders achieve goals which they had identified four years earlier;
- The factors that hindered young Torres Strait Islanders achieve goals which they had identified four years earlier;
- Mobility patterns in regard to schooling and career; and
- Involvement in the local commercial fishing industry.

Selected findings and insights:
Goals identified in 1999 tended to be short-term and about half of people had achieved their goals by 2003.

- In 1999, the career destination for males was predominantly in trade related areas whereas for females the preferred career destination was in administration;
The main factor helping people achieve their goals was assistance from family and friends. The next most important source of assistance was mentors, schoolteachers, bosses and employers. Few saw institutions such as Jobcentres or Centrelink as providing them assistance in achieving their goals.

People often changed their goals during the course of the study, especially when new opportunities arose. However, problems with availability of a suitable job or training was mentioned by about a third of those re-interviewed; this included breakdown in relationships with employers. Family commitments were another factor influencing whether goals could be achieved.

The Torres Strait Islanders were mobile, with the large majority of those re-interviewed having visited the Australian mainland since the first interview. The Figure below represents the places visited on the mainland between 1999-2003.

Mobility patterns were influenced by access to secondary schooling and training on the mainland (generally Queensland) as secondary schooling was limited to Thursday Island. The Figure below represents the locations of secondary schools attended by those interviewed in 1999.
Secondary Schools attended on the mainland by Torres Strait Islander students, 1999

Commercial fishing offered significant employment opportunities, especially in the Outer Islands where more formal employment was lacking. However many people seemed to rely on a mixture of commercial fishing, CDEP work and subsistence fishing as their means of income. While commercial fishing was a good source of income, overall commercial fishing was seen as offering a poor career path, due to the irregularity of catches and the seasons, fluctuating prices and possibilities of unsustainable harvesting.

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.

Such high levels of student mobility seeking access to secondary schooling places additional responsibilities on schools to ensure effective transitions for the students, especially in regard to transfer of academic
information and, in these cases, often being able to provide counselling and other support services for those students who are away from family. [school transition]

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
Access to post-compulsory schooling, training, employment and higher education
Participation, retention and achievement in post-compulsory schooling, training and higher education
Culturally inclusive support strategies, culturally appropriate work readiness strategies, career counsellors and mentors

Related papers:


