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**The comparative economic status
of Torres Strait Islanders in
Torres Strait and mainland
Australia**

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- identify and analyse the factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour force; and
- assist in the development of government strategies aimed at raising the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour market.

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ABSTRACT

A large proportion of Torres Strait Islanders live on the Australian mainland, away from Torres Strait. This has created two different social and economic environments for the population. In the Strait and on the tip of Cape York, Islanders live mainly in small communities, have limited job opportunities and depend largely on employment creation schemes. By comparison, Islanders on the mainland are dispersed throughout the general population in urban centres and have access to a range of employment and other opportunities. This paper compares the economic status of Islanders in these two settings with that of all Australians.

Employment and unemployment statistics indicate that the labour force status of Islanders in the Strait is superior to that of Islanders on the mainland. However, it is known that this is largely due to the employment effects of the CDEP scheme. If CDEP scheme participants in the Strait are discounted from census employment statistics then it can be concluded that Islanders on the mainland have a higher economic status than those living in the Strait. Islanders in the Strait also have small average incomes and low educational status compared with Islanders living elsewhere. Overall, Islanders on the mainland occupy a position of intermediate economic status between their counterparts in the Strait and that of Australians in general. This ranking of economic status implies that the degree of effort made to enhance the economic position of Torres Strait Islanders generally must be doubled for those residing in the Torres Strait Regional Authority area.

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Foreword

In 1994, CAEPR made a concerted effort to focus a significant proportion of its research effort on Torres Strait issues. This decision was influenced by a number of factors. First, a combination of the High Court *Mabo* decision in 1992, the passage of the *Native Title Act 1993* and the formation of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) in 1994, have given Torres Strait a special significance in contemporary indigenous affairs policy in Australia. Second, specialist staff resources were available in 1994 to focus on Torres Strait. Bill Arthur visited CAEPR on secondment from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for three months (April to July). Richard Davis, a doctoral student in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, ANU who also joined CAEPR for a short period, resided on Saibai Island in the Torres Strait where he undertook anthropological fieldwork. Third, CAEPR maintains a commitment to focus a proportion of its research effort on Torres Strait Islander issues.

This paper is one in a set of four CAEPR Discussion Papers, Nos 71-74, being released simultaneously. They focus on: socioeconomic change in the Torres Strait between 1986 and 1991 (No. 71); socioeconomic differences between Torres Strait Islanders living elsewhere in Australia and in the Strait (No. 72); the development potential of commercial fisheries in Torres Strait (No. 73); and the new Torres Strait Regional Authority as a political structure and its potential implications for future regional government (No. 74). Richard Davis's discussion paper on the Saibai Island microeconomy and its development potential will be completed and published at a later date. It is anticipated that additional work on Torres Strait issues, some specifically for the TSRA, will be undertaken in 1995.

Jon Altman
Series Editor
October 1994

For a variety of reasons, not the least of which was a desire for economic advancement, Torres Strait Islanders have migrated from Torres Strait to other parts of Australia since World War II (Beckett 1987; Taylor and Arthur 1993).¹ This has created two very different social and economic environments for the Torres Strait Islander population: Torres Strait and mainland Australia. The Strait area comprises a remote archipelago lying between the tip of Cape York and Papua New Guinea. Islanders in this region live in three distinct settings: small dispersed island communities, on Thursday Island the region's main service centre, and in Islander communities on Cape York. Overall, they form almost three-quarters of the total population of the Strait. The Strait's economy is dominated by just two industries: commercial fishing and the provision of services to the local population (Arthur 1994).

By comparison, Islanders living away from the Strait reside predominantly in large urban centres on the Australian mainland where they tend to be dispersed throughout the general population and form a very small proportion of the total. Consequently, unlike Strait residents, mainland Islanders have potential access to a wide spectrum of mainstream employment opportunities as well as to a more comprehensive range of educational, training, health and other social services.

In recognition of a substantial client base with potentially distinct needs in areas away from Torres Strait, the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (TSIAB) was established in 1989 within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in Canberra. Its purpose was to monitor the impacts of government policy on Islanders in mainland centres. At the same time, the Torres Strait Regional Council was formed to represent the Torres Strait within the ATSIC structure.² More recently, in recognition of the distinctiveness of Torres Strait as a regional economy and polity, the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) was established to devise and implement policies for Islanders resident in the TSRA area.³ Though the TSRA's Corporate Plan stresses the need for links to be maintained between Islanders inside and outside Torres Strait, the creation and functions of the TSRA and the TSIAB tend, at an administrative and policy level, to separate the Islander population into two constituencies (TSRA 1994).

The formation of these separate administrative structures concerned with policies affecting distinct components of the Torres Strait Islander population suggests the need for discrete analyses of the respective client groups. To date, discussion of the economic status of Torres Strait Islanders has considered the population as a single group regardless of location. Taylor and Gaminiratne (1993), for example, have examined the economic status of Torres Strait Islanders at a national level using 1986 Census data, while Taylor (1994) has done the same for Queensland. These analyses revealed their overall situation in terms of labour force status,

educational levels and income, to lie between the relatively low status of the Aboriginal population and the relatively high status of the non-indigenous population. Given the quite different economic circumstances of Islander communities in the Strait compared with those in mainland cities, it is by no means certain that this national estimation of economic status would apply in all cases. Clearly, an adequately informed policy process requires more disaggregated analysis.

The tendency in discussions of indigenous economic policy is to establish relativities against the population as a whole. This is best illustrated by the intent of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) which aimed to establish equality for indigenous people in employment and income levels with the rest of the population by the year 2000 (Australian Government 1987). This paper adopts a similar device by comparing the economic status of Islanders in the Strait with their counterparts on the mainland. This also provides a convenient way of controlling for the economic effects of island living, as opposed to mainland city living, thereby adding insight to the range of possible development options for the TSRA. For these purposes, standard social indicators are employed from the 1991 Census.

Demographic contrasts

The levels of migration out of Torres Strait to other parts of Australia observed in the early 1970s led to a prediction that 83 per cent of all Islanders would live outside the Strait by the year 2000 (Caldwell et al. 1975). Census data suggest that this distributional imbalance was almost reached in 1991 when 80 per cent of the 26,887 Islanders identifying in the census were recorded as residing in mainland localities. However, there is uncertainty about the accuracy of Islander population figures from recent censuses because these show abnormally high intercensal change. This is particularly so with respect to areas away from the Strait. For example, the Islander population in the Strait increased by 15 per cent between 1986 and 1991 while the Islander population elsewhere grew by 28 per cent, a figure far above what natural population growth would produce. One explanation advanced for these large increases on the mainland is that island people from other places such as the Pacific, and to a lesser extent Bass Strait and the Mediterranean, are incorrectly self-identifying as Torres Strait Islanders on census forms (Arthur 1992; Evans et al. 1993: 27). Such people, originating from other island places, and who are most likely to misidentify, are more likely to be resident on the mainland than in the Strait.

Bearing these data problems in mind, Table 1 indicates that almost 84 per cent of all Islanders live in just three States, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria and that nearly 55 per cent of all Islanders reside in

Queensland alone. Across Australia, Islanders reside predominantly in coastal locations and in urban and major urban centres but the greatest single concentration of Islanders in terms of numbers and as a proportion of local population, is in the Strait (Taylor 1993a: 10-11). Furthermore, 91 per cent of those who moved to the Strait between 1986 and 1991 (some 400 persons) did so from other parts of Queensland, supporting the proposition that Islanders in the Strait and those in the east coast towns of Queensland maintain very strong connections (Beckett 1987; Taylor and Arthur 1993).

Table 1. Distribution of the Torres Strait Islander population by State and Territory, 1991.

	Number	Per cent
Queensland	14,649	54.5
New South Wales	4,886	18.2
Victoria	2,996	11.1
South Australia	1,593	5.9
Tasmania	1,265	4.7
Western Australia	777	2.9
Northern Territory	623	2.3
Australian Capital Territory	98	0.4
Total	26,887	100.0

Table 2. Age distribution: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders Strait Per cent	Mainland Per cent	Total Australians Per cent
0-14 years	42.5	37.0	22.4
15-24 years	16.5	20.3	15.8
25-34 years	13.7	15.9	16.1
35-54 years	17.1	19.1	26.0
55-64 years	5.5	4.3	8.4
65 years +	4.8	3.4	11.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Working age (15-64 years)	52.7	59.6	66.3

Part of the motivation for the large-scale migration of Islanders to the mainland in the period immediately after World War II was economic (Beckett 1987: 127). As noted in the 1970s, this resulted in the Islander

population of the Strait containing fewer people of working age than would normally be expected (Duncan 1974). Though the situation has changed since that time, the population in the Strait still contains a lower proportion of working-age people than elsewhere with the difference being most noticeable amongst the 15-34 year old age group (Table 2). This suggests that the mainland continues to attract Islanders for employment and training, though at a lower rate than in earlier decades. This likelihood has been alluded to in a previous analysis of population mobility (Taylor and Arthur 1993).

Labour force status

Progress towards the AEDP goal of equality in labour force status can be measured using three standard census indicators. These are: the employment rate representing the percentage of those aged 15-64 years who indicated that they held a job during the week prior to the enumeration; the unemployment rate expressing those not in employment at the time of the enumeration, but who had actively sought work during the previous four weeks, as a percentage of those in the labour force (employed plus unemployed); and the labour force participation rate representing those in the labour force as a percentage of those of working age.

Table 3. Labour force status: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.^a

	Torres Strait Islanders				Total Australians Rate
	Strait		Mainland		
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	
Employed	1,453	51.7	6,046	49.4	64.7
Unemployed	202	12.2	1,861	23.5	11.5
Labour force participation CDEP scheme adjustment	1,655	58.8	7,907	64.6	73.1
Employed	930	32.7	6,046	49.4	64.7
Unemployed	725	43.8	1,861	23.5	11.5
Labour force participation	1,655	58.8	7,907	64.6	73.1

a. Excludes those who did not state their labour force status.

According to these definitions the labour force status of Islanders in the Strait is higher than for those on the mainland. As shown in Table 3, the employment rate is slightly higher in the Strait (51.7 per cent compared to 49.4 per cent); the unemployment rate is almost twice as low (12.2 per cent versus 23.5 per cent); and the participation rate is only marginally lower

(58.8 per cent against 64.6 per cent). Perhaps more surprisingly, the level of Islander unemployment in the Strait is only marginally above that recorded for all Australians (12.2 per cent versus 11.5 per cent) indicating that one criteria of labour force equality is close to being met. On the other hand, the data in Table 4 show that Islanders in the Strait are much more likely to be in part-time work than are those on the mainland. Furthermore, Islanders on the mainland are almost as likely to be in full-time work as are Australians in general.

Table 4. Hours worked: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders				Total Australians
	Strait		Mainland		Per cent
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Total part-time	547	37.4	1,605	26.3	25.8
Total full-time	819	56.0	4,026	65.9	69.0
Not stated	98	6.6	475	7.8	5.2
Total	1,464	100.0	6,106	100.0	100.0

These data are heavily influenced by the participation of communities in the Strait in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme and the likely absence of such participation among Islanders on the mainland.⁴ Participants in the scheme are classified as employed in the census but such employment, by the nature of the scheme's operation, is invariably part-time. In 1991, a total of 13 Strait communities were engaged in the scheme, with a total of 979 participants, although not all of these would be recorded by the census as employed since the participant schedules include non-working spouses. Precisely what proportion of CDEP scheme participants were workers is not known but a 60 per cent ratio was employed by the AEDP Review based on evidence from a range of case studies (Bambllett 1994; Taylor 1993a: 3).

It can be argued that the CDEP scheme is effectively a 'work-for-the-dole' program and that it does not create formal employment in the sense recognised by the concepts of the mainstream labour market. The corollary of this is that people inside the Strait are operating in a different kind of labour market from those on the mainland. The former are engaged predominantly in a secondary labour market typified by low wage, part-time work with little scope for upward mobility and no award structure. The latter operate more in the mainstream labour market with greater opportunity to access full-time employment with award conditions. The likelihood of Islanders on the mainland being employed in the CDEP

scheme is low due to their predominant location in urban centres where the scheme is not available. Whether they would participate in the scheme if it was available is a moot point.

Using the above estimate that 60 per cent of CDEP scheme participants were recorded as employed by the census, it is possible to adjust the labour force data on the assumption that they should more realistically have been recorded as unemployed. The effect of modifying the data in this way is shown in the bottom panel of Table 3. Not surprisingly, the employment rate in the Strait declines considerably while the unemployment rate increases to an equivalent degree. Viewed in this light, the apparently superior labour force status of Islanders in the Strait is far less impressive.

Occupational status

The occupational distribution of Islanders varies considerably between the Strait and the mainland. Table 5 shows that those on the mainland are more likely to be engaged as tradespersons, sales and personnel workers and plant and machinery operators than Islanders in the Strait, and less likely to be employed as labourers. On the other hand, a higher proportion of Islanders in the Strait are found in professional and para-professional occupations. This pattern reflects the localised and restrictive nature of the labour market in the Strait compared to the mainland.

Table 5. Occupational distribution: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders		Total Australians		
	Strait	Mainland	Strait	Mainland	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Per cent
Managers and administrators	56	3.8	374	6.1	12.2
Professionals	104	7.1	258	4.2	12.6
Para-professionals	122	8.4	321	5.2	6.8
Tradespersons	142	10.0	964	15.7	13.5
Clerks	165	11.4	738	12.0	15.0
Sales and personnel	124	8.5	708	11.6	13.9
Plant and machine operators	60	4.1	672	11.0	7.0
Labourers and related workers	407	28.0	1,450	23.7	12.3
Inadequately described	142	10.0	103	1.7	
Not stated	131	8.7	540	8.8	6.7 ^a
Total	1,453	100.0	6,128	100.0	100.0

a. Inadequately described and not stated categories combined.

Essentially, the Strait labour market appears more polarised, with jobs available in either professional and clerical activities aimed at servicing the

region's population, or in labouring activities generated by the CDEP scheme. These data also reflect a degree of Islanderisation of public sector positions in the Strait, for example in the areas of health, education, quarantine, immigration, fisheries and general administration. For instance, in each small island community, it has been estimated that Islanders occupy up to thirteen positions which could be classified as para-professional (Arthur 1990: 27). Nonetheless, if occupational equality with other Australians is to be achieved then Islander representation will have to be increased in managerial and professional categories, both in the Strait and on the mainland.

Employment by industry

In all but two industries, public administration and community services, Islanders in the Strait are less represented than their counterparts elsewhere (Table 6). The relatively high levels of employment in public administration and community services in the Strait reflect the importance of the indigenous service industry and the presence of the CDEP scheme in which community services work is usually a significant component (Arthur 1994; Taylor 1993a: 26).

Table 6. Industry of employment: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders				Total Australians
	Strait		Mainland		Per cent
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Agriculture, fishing, hunting	24	1.6	375	6.1	4.5
Mining	0	0.0	131	2.1	1.2
Manufacturing	9	0.6	763	12.5	13.2
Electricity, gas and water	18	1.2	74	1.2	1.3
Construction	30	2.0	471	7.7	5.9
Wholesale, retail	102	7.0	994	16.2	18.9
Transport and storage	43	2.9	347	5.7	4.6
Communication	12	0.8	81	1.3	1.7
Financial services	15	1.0	318	5.2	11.2
Public administration	381	26.0	472	7.7	5.6
Community services	611	41.8	908	14.8	17.6
Recreation, personal services	62	4.2	467	7.6	7.0
Not classifiable	9	0.6	12	0.2	
Not stated	147	10.3	705	11.7	7.3 ^a
Total	1,463	100.0	6,118	100.0	100.0

a. Not classifiable and not stated combined.

Surprisingly, the data in Table 6 also show that Islanders are more likely to be employed in agriculture and fishing if they live away from Torres Strait.

This is contrary to expectation given that commercial fishing contributes significantly to Islander incomes in the Strait and is potentially an industry of great significance for development in the region (Altman et al. 1994; Arthur 1990, 1991; Lea et al. 1990; Mulrennan 1993). On the other hand, it has been noted elsewhere that Islanders in the Strait who are part-time fishers and part-time community workers in the CDEP scheme, were not necessarily recorded in the census as employed in the fisheries sector, and the data in Table 6 no doubt reflect their exclusion from this industry classification (Arthur 1994).

One striking feature of employment distribution by industry is the fact that Islanders on the mainland are represented in many industries at approximately the same level as the general Australian population. This provides a clear indication of the greater movement towards labour force equality that has occurred on the mainland compared to the Strait. Interestingly, given the public perception of indigenous antipathy towards the mining industry, Islanders outside the TSRA are employed in the mining industry at a relatively higher rate than other Australians although, to be fair, absolute numbers are very small.

Table 7. Employment status: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders ^a				Total Australians
	Strait		Mainland		Per cent
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Wage and salary	1,404	95.9	5,351	89.0	79.4
Self employed, employer	55	3.7	609	10.0	16.4
Unpaid helper	5	0.4	64	1.0	4.2 ^b
Total	1,464	100.0	6,024	100.0	100.0

a. Due to the availability of data, this refers to those aged 15 years and over and not those 15-64 years.

b. Includes the unpaid helper and not stated categories.

Employment status

An additional perspective on labour force status is provided by information on employment status. This refers to a disaggregation of individuals in employment according to whether they are wage and salary earners or self-employed. The focus of special attention from a policy point of view is on the latter group who are regarded as the closest available proxy for those engaged in entrepreneurial activity. Overall, this group comprised a relatively small proportion of employed Islanders compared to the general population (Table 7), but a marked difference also emerges between the

very low level of self-employment in the Strait compared to the mainland (3.7 versus 10.0 per cent). These data partly reflect the participation of Strait-based Islanders in the CDEP scheme which classifies them as wage earners. Nonetheless, the low rate of self-employment in the Strait is still surprising given that Islanders involved in commercial fishing would normally be working on a self-employed basis (Arthur 1990).

Industry sector

Islanders in the Strait are far more likely than those on the mainland to be employed by the Queensland State Government and by local government, but are markedly less likely to be employed in the private sector (Table 8). Some of this difference can be attributed to employment in the CDEP scheme in the Strait which in the 1991 Census was classified as employment in local government rather than in the private sector as had been the case in previous censuses (Taylor 1993a: 31). The importance of State government employment in the Strait has been documented elsewhere and may be seen as a function of the significance of the Strait as a distinct region requiring localised administrative services (Arthur 1990; Kehoe-Forutan 1990). The employment of Islanders on the mainland in each industry sector is remarkably similar to that of all Australians, which indicates again the higher degree of incorporation of mainland Islanders into the mainstream labour market.

Table 8. Industry sector of employment: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders				Total Australians
	Strait		Mainland		Per cent
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Commonwealth Government	39	2.7	369	6.0	6.2
State Government	310	21.2	803	13.2	13.9
Local government	417	28.5	298	4.9	2.0
Private sector	537	36.7	4,060	66.5	72.0
Not stated	161	10.9	576	9.4	5.9
Total	1,464	100.0	6,106	100.0	100.0

Dependency ratios

An added perspective on labour force status is provided by considering levels of employment against the demographic structure of the population and, in particular, the degree to which those in work, or potentially available for work, theoretically provide for those who are ineligible for work by virtue of their age. A range of such dependency measures are available and are shown in Table 9. Of particular interest is the economic

burden. This provides a measure of the extent to which incomes from employment might be called on to support those with no employment income and those with relatively low incomes from pensions (single parents, people with numerous dependants and the aged). A high ratio indicates that employment incomes have to support a relatively high proportion of the population; low ratios, on the other hand, indicate that such income is available to support a relatively low proportion of the population.

Table 9. Dependency ratios: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Strait	Mainland	Total Australians
Childhood dependency ^a	81	62	34
Childhood burden ^b	163	131	53
Dependency ratio ^c	227	151	106
Economic burden ^d	259	198	120
Aged dependency ^e	5	3	11

a. Those 0-14 years old as a proportion of those 15-64 years old, times 100.

b. Those 0-14 years old as a proportion of the number of employed persons aged 15 years and over, times 100.

c. Those 0-14 years old plus those not in the labour force, as a proportion of those in the labour force, times 100.

d. Those 0-14 years old plus those not in the labour force, as a proportion of the number of persons employed 15 years and over, times 100.

e. Those aged 65 years and over as a proportion of the total population.

In all cases, the ratios shown in Table 9 are higher in the TSRA than outside of it, notwithstanding the higher official rates of employment in the TSRA shown in Table 3. This observation is a measure of the younger age profile of the Strait's Islander population. These data suggest that, all other things being equal, income from employment in the Strait is required to support more people than equivalent income obtained elsewhere. As a qualifier, it should be noted that some Islanders in the Strait obtain additional income, that might not be declared, particularly from commercial fishing, and imputed income from customary fishing and gardening which is excluded from the census (Altman and Allen 1992; Altman et al. 1994). In addition, their basic living costs such as housing and transport may be low when compared to levels outside the TSRA (Arthur 1990, 1994). At the same time, the retail price index of goods on Thursday Island is the highest in Queensland being typically one-quarter to one-third above most mainland centres in 1994 (Queensland Government 1994).

Education and training

The AEDP recognises that crucial links exist between employment levels and education levels, a relationship that has been formally established in terms of human capital theory (Daly 1993). The availability and effectiveness of education and training in the Strait compared to the mainland can be considered by using data on the age at which people leave school, on their levels of qualification, and attendance at post-secondary institutions. The data in Table 10 suggest that, in most cases, Islanders leave school at approximately the same age as other Australians. The major exception is that a lower proportion of Islanders on the mainland are reported to have left school at the age of 17 years or over, compared to Islanders in the Strait. Reasons for this variation are not clear and require further investigation. Certainly no major difference in access to secondary education exists according to location and, if it did, it would be more likely to favour the mainland population.

Table 10. Age at leaving school: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders				Total Australians
	Strait		Mainland		Per cent
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Under 15 years	389	12.1	1,924	14.4	15.0
15-16 years	1,265	39.2	6,086	45.5	40.1
17 years +	980	30.3	2,837	21.2	31.3
Never attended school	48	1.5	193	1.4	0.9
Still at school	154	4.8	985	7.4	4.7
Not stated	391	12.1	1,361	10.1	8.0
Total	3,227	100.0	13,386	100.0	100.0

As far as qualification levels are concerned, comparison of the data is made difficult by the often small numbers in census categories as well as the fact that a sizeable proportion of Islanders in the Strait did not answer the 1991 Census question regarding qualification levels. Nonetheless, Table 11 shows that for all levels of qualification Islanders on the mainland are more represented than those in the Strait, while both groups fall substantially short of the levels recorded for the population generally. Islanders on the mainland most closely approach equality with other Australians in the vocational category, although this most probably mirrors the trend noted nationally for indigenous people to be involved in preparatory courses rather than in those that are strictly technical or academic (Department of Employment, Education and Training 1994: 30-1).

Table 11. Level of qualifications: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders				Total Australians
	Strait		Mainland		Per cent
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Higher degree/diploma	3	0.1	24	0.2	1.9
Bachelor degree	3	0.1	96	0.7	5.7
Other diploma	82	2.5	209	1.6	5.2
Vocational	120	3.7	1,269	9.5	13.5
No qualifications	2,542	78.8	10,097	75.4	61.2
Not stated ^a	476	14.8	1,669	12.6	12.5
Total	3,226	100.0	13,394	100.0	100.0

a. Includes the not stated and other categories.

Table 12. Attendance at educational institutions: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders				Total Australians
	Strait		Mainland		Per cent
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Pre school	252	4.5	537	2.5	1.6
Infant/Primary school	806	14.3	3,104	14.6	9.6
Secondary	398	7.1	1,950	9.2	7.0
TAFE college	42	0.7	434	2.0	2.5
CAE/University	7	0.1	324	1.5	3.2
Not stated ^a	824	14.7	1,860	8.7	5.8
Not attending	3,289	58.6	1,3076	61.5	70.3
Total	5,618	100.0	21,285	100.0	100.0

a. Includes the not stated and other categories.

At the higher education level, indigenous people generally are more likely to attend a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college than a university (Daly 1993: 6) This trend is also apparent among Torres Strait Islanders, although it appears that those on the mainland attend both TAFE colleges and universities at a much higher rate than Islanders in the Strait, no doubt reflecting their greater access to such institutions. Regarding the rate of attendance at TAFE colleges, Islanders outside the TSRA have almost reached equality with all Australians (2.0 versus 2.5 per cent). However, these data are potentially misleading, given that they reflect the location of individuals on census night and not, necessarily, their usual place of residence. In this context, it is possible that the attendance figures

for Islanders on the mainland include individuals who are absent from the Strait precisely to access educational institutions. A more accurate analysis of the situation would require the same data to be generated according to usual place of residence.

Income status

Raising indigenous incomes so that they equate with those of non-indigenous Australians has been one of the key goals of government policy (Australian Government 1987; Taylor 1993a: 38). Table 13 shows that the scale of this task is greater in respect of Islanders living in the Strait, although Islanders generally have incomes that are three-quarters the level recorded for all Australians. A degree of variation is also apparent between Islanders in the Strait and those elsewhere in terms of the range of their income distribution. Table 13 shows a widening of this gap in incomes in the upper quartile of the range indicating the greater earning capacity of Islanders on the mainland, no doubt as a result of their better labour force status and access to a wider variety of mainstream employment opportunities. Conversely, the lower incomes in the Strait can be attributed to the smaller range of mainstream jobs and the fact that much of the remuneration from employment in the CDEP scheme is tied to welfare entitlements.

Table 13. Individual incomes: Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait, on the mainland and total Australians, 1991.

	Torres Strait Islanders (\$)	Mainland Islanders (\$)	Total Australians (\$)
First quartile ^a	5,599	5,862	6,570
Median ^b	10,137	11,244	14,000
Third quartile ^c	15,899	19,248	25,000

All calculations exclude those who did not state their incomes.

- a. A quarter of all people had incomes below this figure.
- b. Half of the people had incomes less than this and half had incomes above this figure.
- c. A quarter of the people had incomes above this figure.

Policy implications

Official data indicate that around 80 per cent of Torres Strait Islanders live outside Torres Strait. Although most of these are found in Queensland, significant numbers are also evident in areas less commonly associated

with Islander settlement, notably in New South Wales and Victoria. While age profiles of the Islander population point to the likely continuance of net migration from Torres Strait of people from working-age groups, the historic movement of population away from the Strait to the mainland appears to have abated. Two factors point in this direction. First, the Strait proportion of the total Islander population has remained stable over the last two intercensal periods. Secondly, it is likely, due to misidentification on census forms, that the Islander population overall is inflated by the inclusion of individuals of non-Torres Strait Islander origin. From what is known of this phenomenon, a greater chance of such occurrence is evident on the mainland, a contention supported by the far higher rate of intercensal growth of the mainland population. To the extent that this is so, it would suggest that the 20 per cent share of the total Islander population allocated by the census to the Strait, is a minimum proportion. Whatever the case, if the distribution of resources to Islanders across the country were to be based solely on population numbers as recorded by the census, the validity of such data would need to be very closely scrutinised.

Leaving aside the uncertainty surrounding official population numbers, the clear indication from employment and unemployment statistics is that the labour force status of Islanders in the Strait is superior to that recorded for Islanders on the mainland. However, it is known that this higher labour force status is due largely to the employment effects of the CDEP scheme. This is supported by other data, such as the predominance of part-time employment in the Strait as well as by income data which show that, despite their higher rates of employment and lower unemployment, Islanders in the Strait have relatively small average incomes. Indicators of education and training also show that the educational status of Islanders in the Strait lags behind that of Islanders elsewhere and is considerably below the Australian norm.

If CDEP scheme participants in the Strait are discounted from census employment statistics, then the conclusion can be drawn that Islanders residing on the mainland have emphatically higher economic status than those in the Strait. Furthermore, unlike their counterparts in the Strait, mainland residents are, according to some social indicators, approaching a position of statistical equality with other Australians. Viewed overall, Islanders on the mainland occupy a position of intermediate economic status between that of their counterparts in the Strait and that of Australians in general. This pattern is akin to the one observed for Torres Strait Islanders generally in relation to the economic status of Aboriginal and all other Australians (Taylor 1993a; Taylor and Gaminiratne 1993).

From a policy perspective, this ranking of relative economic status has several implications. First, it signals that whatever efforts are envisaged to enhance the economic status of Torres Strait Islanders generally, these will need to be doubled for those residing in the Torres Strait Regional

Authority area. Second, it provides an economic rationale as part of the explanation of why Islanders have left the Strait in the recent past, leaving a greater economic burden on those remaining. The indication is that migration has enabled Islanders to better their economic status. However, this must be qualified as those who may be incorrectly identified in the census may also be upwardly distorting the overall economic status of Islanders on the mainland. Also, much of the income earned by Islanders in the Strait, such as that from commercial fishing, may not be recorded in the census (Altman and Allen 1992; Arthur 1994). Thus, locational differences in economic status may not be as great as suggested by standard social indicators. Nonetheless, if one aim of policy is to minimise, or even reverse, any loss of human capital from the Strait, then the gap revealed by census data will need to be reduced. One ironic result of this, however, may be to raise population pressure given that an element of post-war population increase in the Strait has been steadily siphoned off to the mainland.

Finally, it provides support to the logic of regionalising Islander affairs. The narrower base and more marginalised nature of the Strait economy is reflected in a limited range of job opportunities and greater dependence on public subvention for employment creation. Clearly, two very different labour markets exist and the challenge in the Strait has as much to do with moving CDEP scheme participants beyond the income generating capacity of social security entitlements as it has with improving access to mainstream jobs. As with any small community in remote Australia, Strait residents seeking greater diversity of opportunity may still be forced to migrate to larger population centres. At the same time, with the granting of native title and with greater Islander control over economic resources, the potential exists for increased Islander involvement in private sector developments, either in wholly Islander-owned enterprises or in joint venture arrangements, most notably in activities related to commercial fishing and, potentially, tourism (Arthur 1990; Altman et al. 1994).

Notes

1. For the remainder of this paper, Torres Strait Islanders will be referred to as 'Islanders'.
2. Originally, the regional council was incorrectly gazetted as the Thursday Island Regional Council, though this was quickly changed by the Regional Council itself (Torres Strait Regional Council 1991: 13). Some recent ATSIC material continues, rather confusingly, to refer to the regional council area using the Thursday Island region label (for example, ATSIC 1993: 6).
3. The Torres Strait Regional Authority was established by the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act (No. 3) 1993*. The most authoritative delineation of the area bounded by the Authority is shown on the map in Altman et al. (1994: 6).
4. The CDEP scheme is a Commonwealth Government program in which unemployed indigenous people of working age forgo their entitlements to

payments from the Department of Social Security but receive the equivalent from a local community organisation in return for work. For a full description of the scheme and the policy issues surrounding it, see Altman and Sanders (1991) and Sanders (1993).

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