

**The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Faculty of
Arts in 1995: Meeting with ANU Council
10 May 1996**

The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) is a multidisciplinary social sciences research unit in the Faculty of Arts. **CAEPR's mission** is to undertake research on Indigenous Australian economic development issues that combines academic excellence with policy relevance and realism. **CAEPR's vision** is to evolve into a stand-alone and independent ANU-based research centre, with strong links to both the community sector and the bureaucracy, that undertakes a mix of policy-relevant and pure research. Our **core disciplinary approach** combines economics and anthropology, with significant inputs from political science and geography.

CAEPR's broad research approach combines a number of elements that, to date, have ensured its survival: our research is independent, rigorous, and whenever possible, quantitatively argued; our research priorities are both long-term and yet responsive to Aboriginal public policy priorities; our outcomes are highly transparent, we refuse to undertake clandestine research for any interest group; and our output is consistently high and policy relevant so that our sponsors feel that they get good value for their investment of scarce research dollars. In a discussion paper that is to be released shortly entitled 'Pathways to Sustained Economic Development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People' our principal financial sponsors the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) highlight CAEPR as one of the very positive aspects of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy, applauding our provision of independent academic research that assesses the efficacy of government economic policy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

1995 was the sixth year since CAEPR's establishment in 1990, but in many ways it was a watershed year that marked CAEPR's evolution into a nationally-recognised and firmly-established research centre focused on Indigenous economic issues. If one event could explain this watershed it is probably the provision of a dedicated space for the Centre in the J.G. Crawford Building: for the first time, the Centre's activities were not hampered by lack of space for staff. In the Crawford Building the Centre also has the use of appropriately-sized seminar facilities, a Centre research library and a publication sales area, all of which enhance its external corporate image as a professional high-quality enterprise.

At another level though, the 1995 watershed demonstrates the lead time necessary to establish reputations: CAEPR has performed consistently since 1990 and has regularly met its annual performance targets as negotiated with ATSIC. In the very complex and politically contentious area of Indigenous policy research there is always scepticism that performance will be maintained or expectation that political suicide will inadvertently occur: CAEPR's adherence to a strategy of undertaking research to the highest academic standards has ensured that its outputs have remained beyond meaningful reproach from ideologues of any persuasion, left or right, black or white.

Key performance highlights in 1995

Broadly-speaking, CAEPR's activities can be divided into three overlapping components: research; outreach; and teaching and training. In terms of notional Centre resource allocation I estimate that we dedicate 60 per cent, 20 per cent and 20 per cent to these three elements.

Research

The broad parameters of our research are defined in the ANU's second agreement with ATSIC for the period 1994-98. But priorities are influenced by a number of factors including key policy and issue imperatives; agency priorities; data availability and staff expertise. In 1995, four priority areas emerged:

- Implementation of native title legislation: Ms Diane Smith and I were engaged by ATSIC and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to participate in a wide-ranging review of Native Title Representative Bodies and to author the review report.
- The availability of data from the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey provided an opportunity for Drs John Taylor and Boyd Hunter to collaborate with the Australian Bureau of Statistics to author a report on the contemporary situation of Indigenous Australians in the labour market (the report is to be published next week).
- Emerging human rights concerns about the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme, a work-for-the-dole scheme, were explored by Dr Will Sanders in research sponsored by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.
- For the first time, CAEPR was able to gain access to DEET (now DEETYA) administrative data sets to assess the effectiveness of both mainstream and special employment and training programs for Indigenous Australians.

In aggregate terms, our research in 1995 was initially made available in 3 CAEPR seminar series (23 seminars); numerous conference, workshop and external seminar presentations; and 60 publications.

Outreach

For CAEPR, outreach is part of the research process; our core operations require close working relations with Indigenous organisations and individuals and federal and state bureaucracies. Key outreach activities in 1995 included:

- The CAEPR seminar series: seminars are highly interactive with discussants in key agencies targeted to participate. In 1995, our seminars averaged 40-45 participants from university, industry and government sectors and from Indigenous organisations.
- Close links with important indigenous organisations: A number of mechanisms are used to forge these links. For example, in 1995, Noel Pearson from the Cape York Land Council was a visiting fellow to CAEPR; CAEPR staff undertook community-based research with a number of Indigenous organisations including over 20 Native Title Representative Bodies; the Redfern Aboriginal Corporation; the Gagudju Association; the Port Lincoln Aboriginal Organisation; the Aurukun Community and the Seisia Community on Cape York. Such links are often forged via consultancy research.
- Publications: In 1995, CAEPR began direct marketing its publications. This has allowed us to proactively disseminate research results by targeting publications and flyers to appropriate interest groups, including politicians and the media.

Teaching

In 1995, a Graduate Certificate in Public Policy with a special focus on Aboriginal Public Policy was developed with the Public Policy Program. There are 25 graduates enrolled in the unit Aboriginal Public Policy currently being taught by Dr Will Sanders and myself.

As a precursor to this course, CAEPR co-sponsored the PPP Interdisciplinary seminar series on Indigenous Australia and Public Policy in 1995. The series was a great success, with the first seminar by Noel Pearson attended by over 150 people, according to Professor Castles, a new record that exceeded that set by ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating in 1992.

In 1995, almost all CAEPR academic staff contributed to the course *Aborigines in Contemporary Australia*. With five anthropologists at CAEPR from 1995, considerable advisory and supervisory support was

provided to students, particularly from the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology in the Faculty of Arts.

Some issues for consideration

1996 needs to be the launching pad for CAEPR's continuation beyond its current funding cycle to 1998. In September, CAEPR will be reviewed as required in the ANU's agreement with ATSIC. While the ANU has made 'in principle' commitment to the Centre to the year 2005, there is no doubt that questions about the funding and future form of the Centre will loom large during review.

The issue of Indigenous Australian socio-economic disadvantage may have been of marginal academic interest in the past, but in the 1990s it has clearly been recognised not just as an issue of national (and international comparative) significance, but also as an issue that will not just go away. To some extent this national focus has resulted from the Mabo High Court judgment and subsequent native title legislation. The Native Title discussion paper that was to be released by the Howard Government yesterday (which is influenced by CAEPR research) demonstrates that despite earlier opposition the new government is moving to recognise native title.

Such developments indicate that there is a strategic opportunity for the ANU, as a national institution, to move to increase its sponsorship of CAEPR. In Australia, CAEPR is the only research centre focusing on indigenous policy issues that has consistently delivered research performance (120 CAEPR publications alone) influencing policy formulation and informing and at times shaping the language of rational debate. CAEPR is now, or soon will be, at a juncture: it needs to undertake more pure research to supplement its policy-oriented work; to maintain, and even enhance, its independence, particularly via university provision of more staff positions; to maintain its staff establishment at a time when all are vulnerable to cutbacks; and most importantly to ensure its continuity to capitalise on an important sunken investment and established reputation.

There is an important research job to be done and CAEPR has demonstrated that it can deliver. The key issue is to what extent the ANU will get behind CAEPR to **systematically** provide core operational support to a research enterprise of national significance whose independence and continuation should be immune from any governmental or agency threat of defunding.

Professor Jon Altman
Director, CAEPR