

Report: Australasian Corrections Education Conference

The Australasian Corrections Education Association (ACEA) 15th Biennial International Conference 11-13th June 2024, addressed the importance of corrections education to empower prisoners during a time of technological advancements and global challenges. The theme of the conference was aimed at finding the best and most innovative approaches to prisoner education. Featured speakers at the conference included expert social justice workers, prison educators, academic lecturers, and people with lived experience. Crucial insight was provided into the restrictions of accessing education in prisons and the importance of providing technological access to counter this issue.

The conference emphasized the positive impact of education in prison settings, especially for overrepresented populations (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and Māori). [A 2020 Australian Bureau of Statistics report revealed that 82% of male prisoners had differing educational and program opportunities (*Education Post Incarceration: Opportunities and Challenges*, L. Carey)]. Prisoners, teachers, service providers, governments, and enforcement agencies all agree on the need for education within the prison system. They recognise that education is instrumental in the successful rehabilitation of prisoners, [contributing to a 43% reduction in recidivism which is supported through a 2013 RAND Corporation report (Davis, Lois M et al., 2013.)]. The unique challenges and implicit biases faced by prisoners need to be acknowledged and the relationships between schools and non-profit agencies need to be strengthened to better support prisoner development and reduce recidivism.

The ability to receive a quality education has become compromised because of under-developed courses, restricted access to education, disruptions faced by prisoners, and a reduced number of quality education providers. The range and type of education programs offered in prisons vary based on jurisdiction as well as who is the education provider. Some educational opportunities occur through trade tickets, programs, secondary school equivalences, TAFE certifications, and tertiary qualifications but are available only for few prisoners and are not well supported.

Across Australian prisons, accessing education is difficult. Prisoners in NSW correctional centers do not have general access to the internet which greatly restricts the delivery of distance education courses and the prisoner's ability to undertake research. Generally, incarcerated people are unable to receive any education levels above Certificate II. Certificates I-II provide basic vocational skills and knowledge, while Certificates III-IV replace the previous system of trade certificates and provide training in more advanced skills and knowledge. Some courses and subjects are not available as they require special equipment or fieldwork. There needs to be a focus on allowing prisoners to attain higher levels of education without the presumption that they are unable to.

Similarly, prisoners in South Australia can enroll in tertiary studies, but internet access to complete their studies is not available in any of the prisons. The Alexander Maconochie Centre in the ACT is the only prison in Australia that permits direct access to the internet, enabling access to approved websites containing educational materials and legal resources. [This is revealed through an [information booklet](#) released in 2010, exploring the activities and programs provided to incarcerated individuals. However, an article published by [Crikey](#) revealed that prisoners did not have access to education for a year because there were difficulties in finding a replacement education provider (*'Squandered opportunity': Australian prisoners are being denied education, 2022*)].

Tina McPhee, a Criminologist at the University of NSW with lived experience, was incarcerated in Adelaide. She discussed that there was no opportunity to study in prison because the courses were developed at a basic high school numeracy and literacy level. Education programs in prison were delivered using outdated stencils which made learners feel infantilised. There was a severe lack of access to university programs and any advocacy for education access was restricted to the point where people felt muzzled and stifled. Only three people in the facility, including Tina, were allowed to attend in-person tutorials and lectures. Tina recommended that prisons should create a partnership with higher education facilities. She used UC Berkeley's 'Teach in Prison' program as an example, where Bachelor's degree courses are created by universities and run by external partners alongside the corrections officer. She, and other lived experience student-educators believe that prisons and corrections services should not be trusted to create and run their programs.

To minimize the issue of disruption to education, Scandinavian countries have an efficient system. Prisoners have logins for their tablets, which allows them to access their coursework using their login, even if they have been transferred to a different facility. People in positions of authority maintained mindsets of prisoners lacking critical thinking, which could potentially result in insufficient funding and technology support mentioned in the report. This is detrimental and it has been urged that a cultural shift in treating prisoners must be done to acknowledge their existence as people.

The reality of high turnover rates amongst education staff is also a barrier for prisoner education. [Community Correctional Services (CCS) has recorded the turnover rate for entry-level staff is around 43%, as of 2017 (*Managing Community Corrections Orders, 2017*)]. Implicit knowledge is often lost when one person takes over from another and thus, the need to retain knowledge and information is essential to keep education systems running smoothly. However, the situation is understandable, as the safety and security of education staff are a priority when working with students and center staff in prisons. Individuals who are involved in these settings should be trained with special techniques and interventions, especially with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, to foster a considerate and patient environment in which all actors can thrive. Understanding the corrections environment, and inducing its culture and dynamics, is grounded in practice and helps educators anticipate issues and establish a supportive atmosphere for learning.

There were many discussions at the conference on the use of telecommunication to provide educational access to detainees. Many concerns were raised about the effectiveness of telecommunication in the

prison. The two main issues across all jurisdictions are scalability and funding. A discussion of these issues and how to improve them would be beneficial. Telecommunications play a vital role in prison education and more attention should be given by stakeholders. [The notion of accessibility and university linkage, where Queensland has the highest level of participants in higher education (6.2%) where education programs are run by the University of Southern Queensland. This provides mentoring and direct educational contact for incarcerated individuals (*Education Post Incarceration: Opportunities and Challenges*, L. Carey)].

Telecommunications in prison is required to ensure equity and fair educational opportunities for the diverse populations and Indigenous overrepresentation, including Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Indigenous people are extremely overrepresented in the prison system, and their limited access to education serves them no further assistance they desperately require. Culturally responsive education should be implemented into curriculums, strengthening mental health and a sense of well-being whilst reducing reoffending. Only then can prisoners become more self-sufficient and benefit from the integration of technology.

However, considering that correction settings prioritize security in all aspects, it is reasonable to be able to regulate the use of the Internet. For example, the University of Buenos Aires has done a trial on providing access to education and the internet. It is worth analyzing the risks and benefits of the outcomes, which can benefit future education in cells. The paper on the [Benefits of Education](#) outlines the necessities of education and how prisoners can thrive by participating in their learning. A lack of education ultimately strips incarcerated people away from the right to attain these benefits, affecting their personhood and the right to learn. Tina McPhee also concluded that there was a lack of access to university programs, and the government prohibited incarcerated people from accessing materials from universities.

The 15th Biennial ACEA conference was a pleasure to attend and extremely informative. As a plan for the future, it would be very useful to have a survey of the delivery of education in each jurisdiction, to gain a better understanding of the efficiency and quality of what is offered.