

Prisoner Education Survey Report

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“I feel like giving up, which is what they want. The zeal is burning out into despair.”

NSW Prisoner, when asked about access to education.

There has been a systematic failure to deliver education to prisoners across Australia. On July 2, 2024, a letter was distributed to 160 incarcerated individuals, expressing concern about the quality of education in prisons across Australia. The initiative aimed to gather qualitative data from those with firsthand experiences with the educational opportunities available in the Australian prison system. In undertaking this research, seven key questions were posed:

1. What are the educational opportunities in your prison?
2. Have you or others experienced any difficulty in attempting to gain access to education?
3. What do authorities say when you ask?
4. Have any recent changes been made?
5. Do you have access to a computer in your cell? In the education area?
6. Have you or others been given access to TAFE (technical and further education) or any trade courses?
7. Is there an education officer in your prison?

Thirty-two responses were received, and the findings were striking. In summary, prisoners expressed that they felt disappointment, frustration, and disempowerment when pursuing education within their facilities.

One prisoner wrote :

“As helpful as it would be to have a computer in my cell, the idea of it becoming real is totally laughable. There is no push here to educate prisoners. This is sadly a common feature across maximum security jails, and I know this to be true because I have been in most of them.”

Where educational opportunities were available, many prisoners highlighted systemic barriers that hindered their access to learning. This included limited resources, inadequate communication from authorities, and a lack of support when pursuing tertiary education, with one prisoner in a Victorian prison saying:

“The overall consensus is that external education is not viewed positively and is to be actively discouraged. ...Our educational opportunities are very limited, there is much difficulty getting access to quality education, and it is difficult to get reliable responses from the authorities.”

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was ratified by Australia on the 10th of December 1975.¹ It outlines that the right to education means that education on all forms and at all levels must be available and accessible.² Education is a fundamental human right and one which is indisputably owed to the prison population. It creates a foundation for the development of skills and qualifications which not only improve mental and physical well-being, but increase the likelihood of post-release employment and overall rehabilitation.

“Education is my passion, it has always frustrated me how it is not a focus in prison... Over the last 14 years, education in NSW female gaols is non - existent. It is not encouraged or promoted by NSW Corrections Staff or the education staff within the prison”.

- prisoner from Women’s NSW Correctional Centre

Research suggests education is capable of reducing the risk of recidivism by 43%³ and despite supposed support from Australian prisons to treat education as a fundamental pathway towards self directed rehabilitation,⁴ prisoners have expressed firsthand that it seems to be an “afterthought”. There are an extremely limited number of education opportunities in correctional facilities, with one incarcerated student in a WA prison

¹ Austlii, 1997, ‘Australia’s Report Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights’

² Dudgeon, C 2024, ‘The Right to Education in Australia’, *Centre for Law and Social Justice*

³ Davis, Lois M, et al 2013, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education”, Rand.org, RAND Corporation

⁴ Hopkins, S & Farley, H 2014, ‘A Prisoner’s Island: Teaching Australian Incarcerated Students in the Digital Age’, *Journal of Prisoner Education and Reentry*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 42-51

described trying to access education as ‘dehumanising’. Widening the scope and awareness of educational opportunities available to prisoners would develop opportunities and reduce recidivism.

Australian educational institutions have adopted a ‘technology - centred delivery model’ in which education is being delivered online to improve the accessibility and flexibility to those enrolled in distance education.⁵ This is a marked shift from the past, with correspondence courses no longer available. Correctional Services across the country did not anticipate or adapt to this shift, showing a clear lack of responsibility in this area and letting prisoners down. Where previously prisoners could complete educational courses through letters and written correspondence, now all of these processes require access to technology.

It is essential that access to educational institutions is made available by updated technology and software. Prisoners have expressed their frustration and disappointment at the setbacks that the use of technology has imposed on their ability to complete their education timely and efficiently. The consistency of this issue in the data shows the systematic problems that currently exist with the use of technology and software to complete education.

Prisoners outline restricted access to computer facilities, no internet access and outdated software, all of which is hindering the ability of prisoners to complete their coursework. For example, one prisoner from NSW stated that the computers in education blocks located at their facilities were prone to persistent network failures and that along with fellow prisoners they were made to endure a lengthy period of no network connection.

Tablets, which are currently used by prisoners in their cells, are not enough to complete studies efficiently and comprehensively. There should be either laptops or hardware

⁵ Hopkins, S & Farley, H 2014, ‘A Prisoner’s Island: Teaching Australian Incarcerated Students in the Digital Age’, *Journal of Prisoner Education and Reentry*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 42-51

such as keyboards available for prisoners to improve the quality of their learning. Correctional Services nationwide must seek to prioritise updating hardware, software and technology, as this is essential for prisoners to complete their education.

The University of Southern Queensland does provide some online courses for prisoners to complete by downloading onto laptops by education officers. However, education officers are deprioritised by Correctional Services if there are any staff shortages. In NSW, there are only 20 qualified teachers and educators available to prisons, with 138 positions made redundant in 2016.⁶ This would not have been an issue with previous correspondence courses, as prisoners could keep doing the work by themselves in their cells. The ability to pursue education in this way should be made available to prisoners through the use of technology.

Additionally, in the interim while access to technology is being made available, there should be an agreement with the Commissioners of each State and Territory that prisoners should be able to receive books and complete self-directed learning. One prisoner in a NSW prison stated:

“I personally have obtained better education standards by borrowing non-fiction books (most decades old) from our prison library than any course offered by the Education unit.”

⁶ NSW Teachers Federation 2020, ‘Prisons Struggling to Fill Teacher Positions’, Accessed 26 Sep at <https://www.nswtf.org.au/news/2020/03/09/prisons-struggling-to-fill-teacher-positions/>

Recommendations

1. There must be open access to courses run by educational institutions for people in prison. This would require improved access to computers in cells, hardware such as keyboards and monitors that are able to facilitate their studies, relevant software and access to their institutions' white-listed websites.
2. In the interim, prisoners should be allowed to purchase books directly from Australia's largest bookseller, Dymocks, thereby avoiding any security issues. This could be facilitated by, say, the Australasian Correctional Education Association creating a list of suitable reading materials, a list of subjects, prospects for employment and reading materials. This would promote self-directed learning and allow people in prison to access education before computer technology is universally available.

Survey Question Response Summary

Q1. What are the education opportunities in your prison?

Overview of concerns:

- Narrow selection of TAFE and University courses offered to prisoners. When they are, courses are typically of a basic level, relating to general skills.
- Access to education opportunities are limited due to barriers such as gaining approval, computer and internet access.
- There is either limited or no access to educational resources such as computers.

NSW

In the Main Complex of Bathurst Correctional Centre prisoners reported that they did have access to limited traineeships in Certificate II & III. However, for those in the Honour House, prisoners only have access to Certificate III in Animal Studies. More generally in NSW prisons, prisoners reported having access to Advanced Digital Literacy courses through RTOs and TAFE. However, these are offered through outdated versions of software such as Microsoft packages.

While there are educational opportunities, they are very limited in accessibility, diversity, enrollment, and facility provision. In NSW female correctional facilities, education has been non-existent for the past 14 years. Furthermore, the 4 full time staff members were not only “unknowing” but also lacked any understanding of what correctional facilities offered in terms of education.

At Goulburn Correctional Centre, prisoners face severe educational barriers such as no access to libraries or education rooms. They are limited to internal jail work courses with no opportunities for higher education. Prisoners reported struggling with accessing educational resources, Microsoft Word processing, email accounts, and assessing critical websites for legal and governmental information. Educational opportunities are restricted to the final 6 to 18 months of incarceration, with mandatory court-ordered courses which are often denied outside this period. Additionally, incarcerated individuals are rarely being assisted in acquiring books/materials sharing they “rarely felt supported”.

QLD

The University of Southern Queensland offers certain bachelor degrees, however the choices are limited. Borallon Training and Correctional Centre provides basic Certificate I and II courses but this is limited to a few units rather than the entire certificate. Through personal accounts detailed in the letters sent to Justice Action, there appears to be a reluctance to discuss the dissatisfaction associated with educational access due to fear of “retribution for speaking out”. Overall, educational programs are limited and are so heavily restricted that they do not fulfil the students' needs.

SA

Education is limited to workshops surrounding basic high school literacy, numeracy and computers (provided through V-Tech). Some SA prisons provide a choice between paid employment or paid education but prisoners are heavily encouraged to choose the former. For example, at Port Lincoln Prison, a prisoner was deemed too intelligent, and the prison did not provide any educational opportunities, forcing him to commit to the working unit rather than studying. If education is chosen, prisoners are limited to only one hour a week where they can access the education centre or library. There are also issues such as lockdowns, staff shortages, and miscommunication. Complaints about these issues are typically referred to higher authorities like the SA Ombudsman. However, there have been no recent changes, and prisoners have no access to TAFE or education in any trade, with limited internet access available to them in the education area.

VIC

The existing educational provider at Loddon Prison has withdrawn services, leaving prisoners with limited options. In-house courses have been offered, however, the Centre of Excellence trade courses are often delayed due to staff unavailability and budget constraints, which prioritise cost saving not education. Furthermore, in some Victorian prisons it has been reported that there are computer functionality issues, including a recent two-month network outage and problematic “internal security” upgrades. This has severely impacted access to educational resources. Other accounts from the letters highlight the lack of realistic opportunities for prisoners. One prisoner shared that he had applied to full time education not aware of the financial understandings and in turn “ended up with a \$33,000 loan that I never knew I signed up to”. This shows that there is a lack of information and effective communication.

WA

WA prisoners are allowed to study 2 units per semester, meaning a 3 year degree would require a minimum of 6 years to complete (this is most likely due to prisoners being unable to study at a tertiary level as a remand prisoner). Prisons are also under-resourced and staff attempts to support new programs are hindered by authorities. Incarcerated students share that there is the need for transformational change in order to reduce recidivism rates.

Q2. Have you or others experienced any difficulty attempting to gain access to education?

Overview of concerns:

- Institutions have limited resources (e.g. laptops, Internet, library time) which makes it difficult to progress or complete courses
- Staff shortages
- Limited access to information about the courses
- Expensive fees for courses or for resources such as laptops

ACT

In terms of educational purposes, the ACT has the most potential when it comes to the digital infrastructure that is available during incarceration. However, there are many disadvantages and issues that hinder accessibility, such as accessibility to university minimum requirements for online study. These universities include Griffith, Swinburne and Curtin, with the minimum requirements being, internet access, computers, university email access. Furthermore, compared to MAC (OS) and Windows, which are typically used by students, the Linux system used by prison PCs makes it difficult to engage with course materials.

NSW

Whilst some NSW prisons are reported to have in-cell access to tablets, such as the prisoner Legal Green Computer, there are still issues. These include the computers being out-dated and unable to carry out necessary functions such as PDFs. Furthermore, printing is expensive, specifically with the small wage prisoners receive. This hinders or stops people from continuing with work. Finally, the education staff are a significant barrier to gaining access to education opportunities. For example, they would sometimes not allow prisoners to access the needed computers for their course work.

There is also a lack of resources to inform prisoners on available education opportunities and how to enrol in courses.

VIA

The collective response from Victoria demonstrates inconsistency and general resource mismanagement as barriers to education. Issues include staff shortages, unhelpful communication, course unavailability, cancellation, and ill-equipped technologies and resources for such courses. One prisoner reported that being placed in a protection unit eliminates access to education because they cannot mix with many other prisoners. Another prisoner reported that most prisoners have poor reading, writing, and spelling skills, therefore, they want an education. However, they are met with barriers such as a lack of resources, which means they do not get enough education to obtain the required qualifications in order to be employable.

WA

The response collected from WA urged that prisons need more Certificate IV and diploma level outcomes. Additionally, the response highlighted the difficulty in accessing education, one prisoner from Karnet Prison Farm stated that “a number of mechanisms had been deliberately placed to limit the number of tertiary students, all in a bid to reduce staff workload”.

Q3. What do authorities say when you ask about educational opportunities?

Overview of concerns:

- Lack of support from Correctional Facility Staff
- Staff demonstrate an uninterest in helping– lack of awareness amongst staff regarding educational resources
- Correctional staff and Educational Staff are not adequately equipped with information surrounding education for prisoners and if they are, they cannot provide access to course information due to outdated and inaccessible technology.
- Individuals with authority are inconsistent in their responses to prisoners, either taking weeks to reply to a request, ignoring requests altogether, or avoiding organising essential meetings at the request of prisoners
- Prisoners are met with hostile and disempowering attitudes from Correctional Facility Officers.

ACT

Security and risk concerns are the main reasons for the restrictions to education used by authorities. Blocking access to studying is an attempt to eliminate these (unspecified) risks rather than trying to manage them. It was reported that prison staff have an attitude that emphasises punishment which often restricts access to studying.

QLD

There is little to no response when prisoners ask about education opportunities. Certain certificates and opportunities are being revoked, which render prisoners unable to progress further in their studies.

SA

Prisoners, when inquiring into education, are met with dismissive responses from the staff.

WA

The staff's response is commendable. They readily provide all information available to prisoners on probable opportunities upon their requests.

Q4. Have any recent changes relating to education been made in your prison?

Overview of concerns:

- There has been little to no changes to the education system made within prisons
- Limited access to laptops

ACT

Changes have been mostly nonexistent. In some prisons they have added more laptops, computers, or course availability (with very old models or software). However, access to the education building and the prison PC only allows one prisoner at a time, for a short period.

QLD

No changes have been recorded from the letters received

SA

It was reported that there are little to nonexistent changes being made. Furthermore, the limited access to laptops is gradually being revoked.

WA

A number of short courses have been made available that are of significant value. These include, PSenior first-aid, working at heights, confined spaces, forklift, elevated work platform, operate excavator and skid-steer.

Q5. Do you have access to a computer in your cell? In the education area?

Overview of concerns:

- Some institutions give daily or weekly access to education buildings/libraries which have computers.
- Some institutions give tablet access in cells for a limited amount of time.
- Cell computers may be granted for a very costly price.

ACT

The ACT corrective services claim on their webpage 'Detainees have access to computers in their cell and e-learning modules that support their educational or vocational enrolment'. However the prisoner responses revealed that the Alexander Maconochie Centre has stopped the practice of having computers in each cell. Computer access is now considered a privilege at the AMC. Furthermore, computer accessibility is restricted regularly by reasons such as cost or security.

NSW

Certain prisoners from the Goulburn correctional centre have in-cell access through prisoner Green OAC computers. This includes access to OAC login for prisoner storage drive, KOHA, Time Base One-Acts, Laws, Regulations and Legislations, Microsoft Word, prisoner Legal Portal.

The majority of the responses conveyed that there was no access to computers within the prison or only in certain areas such as libraries. It was noted in one response by a prisoner at Lithgow Correctional Centre, "As helpful as it would be to have a computer in my cell, the idea of it becoming real is totally laughable."

QLD

Some prisons permitted access to a digital notebook device. However, to have in-cell access individuals have to pay using the student income that also has to cover other necessary products. Furthermore, this device is limited to an Office Document Suite (Libre Office) and a PDF reader (Acrobat ReaderDc). In some cases there is no access to the internet.

Some Queensland prisoners were denied access to computers after requesting them for a course through the University of Southern Queensland.

SA

The South Australian Government website claims 'Prisoners can also apply to study a range of courses by distance education, including university study. Computer resources may be available but internet access is not available at any of the prisons'. The responses collected confirm there is no internet availability. In terms of computer availability, there were no responses gathered from South Australia that indicated there was in-cell availability to computers. Responses demonstrated that computers were only available in educational areas in the prison and there were not enough computers in these areas.

Q6. Have you or others been given access to TAFE (Technical and Further Education) or any trade courses?

Overview of concerns:

- Of the limited courses available, most are relevant to prison-related work such as kitchen operation, laundry operation, warehousing logistics
- Limited or no access in many prisons

NSW

In general, from the responses gathered, it appears that there are very limited to no TAFE courses available. However some prisons do offer courses for certificates 1-4 in areas such as animal studies, ESL classes, business leadership and management, and applied fashion design and technology.

QLD

In Borallon Training and Correctional Centre it was reported that they used to offer timber construction, however, they no longer have TAFE courses available to prisoners.

SA

One prisoner reported that, to their knowledge they had no access to TAFE courses.

WA

Recent changes have seen traineeships offered in courses such as “kitchen operations, laundry operations, horticulture, warehousing and logistics, abattoir, rural operations. Some progress is being made but these traineeships are limited to prison industries.” Prisoner employment programs offer prisoners the ability to drive themselves to work, earn a wage and learn real job skills. However, there is only one participant in this program.

VIC

One prisoner reports that “While there is access to TAFE courses, few can be done to full completion with no information on how to continue to completion after imprisonment.”

Q7. Is there an education officer in your prison?

Overview of concerns:

- Unresponsive education officers
- Very difficult to see the officer and they are not explicitly announced so many individuals are unaware of their presence.
- Staff are underqualified and do not apply evidence-based strategies and approaches in their work, instead acting in emotional and personal sense. This is mostly reported to be due to lack of education.

ACT

The Alexander Maconochie Centre has an unqualified education officer.

NSW

In about half of the NSW letter responses from NSW, prisoners assert that they were unaware of a prison officer. Of the remaining responses, prisoners state that it is very difficult to come in contact with the education officer and that the officers show a disinterest in supporting the prisoners by not promoting the courses, or the officers are

reassigned to other roles. The Metropolitan Special Programs Centre (MSPC) is reported to have a prisoner to education officer ratio of 400:1. In Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre, the educational officers are reported to be unknown and therefore unidentifiable to the prison population and do not motivate or promote prisoner education.

QLD

There are education officers but they are extremely busy and unable to provide extensive support for the prisoners. They are restricted in their capabilities and cannot make significant changes to aid in educational attainment for the prisoners.

SA

There are officers but they are often not listened to by other staff and they do not have any authority. Direct communication with the education officers are also unavailable in some prisons such as at Port Lincoln Prison where you must put in a request to see the officer.

VIC

Responses state that there is either (1) no education officer provided, (2) a possible but uncertain existence of one, or (3) there is an education officer provider who is very hard to contact due to authorities believing education would allow the prisoners to undermine their authority.

WA

An prisoner who has gone through multiple institutions (Hakea Prison, Casuarina Prison, Acacia Prison, and Karnet Prison Farm) states that there is an education department in all the prisons but each institution varies vastly in the quality and resources of the department. Karnet Prison Farm is stated to have the most resources, policy overhaul and a greater focus on education in recidivism prevention of the four.

Current External Providers

Educational Resources

Who can supply education/what is available?

Institutions such as TAFE and United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) are available to be used; however, further inquiry into them is needed. In terms of tertiary education institutions multiple universities around Australia offer educational programs in correctional facilities. Some of these include:

University of Southern Queensland - provides courses such as preparation programs, business, STEM, multidisciplinary studies and more. The university provides an 'Offline Personal Device' which are repurposed DELL Education series laptops used in all jurisdictions except Victoria to varying degrees, currently still being maintained by UniSQ. These Offline Personal Devices allow incarcerated students to study offline without needing access to the internet and also allow access to support services such as book bursaries, Studiosity, JSTOR and more. The university also supplies 'Unlocking a Future Career' workbooks available from prison education officers which provide information on what prisoners can study once their sentence is complete. UniSQ also offers a Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) aimed at building the necessary skills for tertiary studies. Since 2015 the program has expanded to 39 correctional centres with plans to expand.⁷ More information can be found here → on the [Justice Action website](#) and UniSQ's [Incarcerated Students Guide](#) and UniSQ's [Supporting Incarcerated Students](#) Contact: Stephen Seymour - Coordinator Incarcerated Students stephen.seymour@usq.edu.au or Career counselling: supportforlearning@unisq.edu.au or call 07 4631 2372

Curtin University - which provides courses for all prisons across all jurisdictions in Australia. Examples of courses include Justice Equity Through Art (JETA), which is the only program that can be completed entirely without need for the internet and can run without intervention. It offers fine arts only, including painting, drawing, sculpture and printmaking. Curtin University also offers AHEAD - Prison Outreach Program that offers a wide range of courses. However, most courses from the AHEAD program require internet access as well as cooperation with prison education staff for the upload and

⁷ UniSQ. "Supporting Incarcerated Students | UniSQ Unisa.edu.au, 2024
www.unisq.edu.au/current-students/support/learning-support/incarcerated-students.

access of learning resources such as Blackboard and Youtube.⁸ More information about the coursework can be found here → on the [Justice Action website](#) and the [Curtin Prison Outreach information document](#).

Contact: Len Nielsen - Community and Prison Outreach Coordinator / Curtin AHEAD l.nielsen@curtin.edu.au or Rebecca Dagnall - JETA Program Coordinator r.dagnall@curtin.edu.au

⁸ Malane, Nik. “Prison Engagement and Outreach | Engage.” Curtin.edu.au, 11 Oct. 2022, www.curtin.edu.au/engage/outreach-offerings/prison-engagement-and-outreach/#:~:text=We%20provide%20a%20range%20of.