

# THE CONVERSATION

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## Offline inmates denied education and skills that reduce re-offending

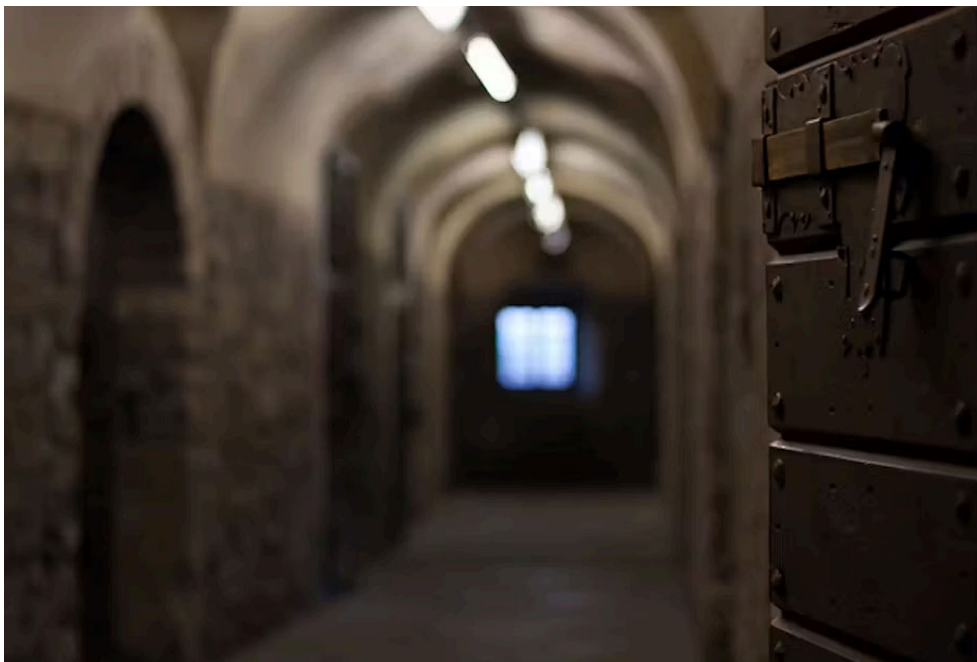
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Education has been found to reduce prisoners' re-offending, but how can they gain the skills they need without the internet? Flickr/I K O, CC BY-SA

*This article is one of several following up The Conversation's series, [State of Imprisonment](#), which provides snapshots of imprisonment trends in each state and territory.*

Technology has found its way into virtually every aspect of our daily lives. But for those who don't have access to the internet and other technologies, how are they expected to keep up? One group for whom this may present a problem is prison inmates.

Technology in prison is highly restricted. But, once outside prison, digital literacy skills — the awareness of, knowledge about and ability to select and use digital tools — are necessary to function effectively in 21st-century society.

## Rehabilitation through education

Following their release, many offenders face significant barriers to entering the workforce. Recent research suggests that nearly half (47%) of prisoners have no formal qualifications, compared to 15% among similar age groups in the general population.

Only 14% of Australian prisoners have completed year 12, compared to 63% of the general population. These figures are even more dire for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners.

As of 2014, there were 33,791 prisoners in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders represent 27% of the full-time adult prison population. This is a grim statistic given they make up approximately 2.5% of the general population.

Perhaps most alarming is that 56% of prisoners will re-offend.

A 2008 study in the US estimated that one in every 100 adults is behind bars and more than 40% will return to prison following their release. Rates of recidivism are as high as 60% in the UK.

But for prisoners undertaking post-secondary education programs, rates of recidivism are considerably lower. In Norway, where internet access is permitted in inmates' cells, recidivism rates are as low as 20%. In New Zealand, educational programs are helping to reduce recidivism by anywhere between 8% and 11%.

However, higher education institutions are moving almost exclusively to online delivery of courses and few universities will offer an education to incarcerated students because it is difficult and time-consuming.

This raises serious issues in Australia, as in most parts of the world, where most jurisdictions do not permit inmates to access the internet. As a result, we are faced with a situation in which prisoners could miss out entirely on the chance to study.

Although traditional forms of educational delivery using hard-copy materials have been largely successful, they do not allow incarcerated students to develop the digital literacy skills required to function in today's society.

## Education initiatives

Every day, thousands of inmates are released into the outside world —a hyper-connected, digital society that may be unrecognisable. Many will not have the digital skills they need to secure employment following their release from prison. This increases the likelihood that they will re-offend.

A number of initiatives are underway that aim to equip prisoners with skills they will need to make them attractive to future employers.

In the UK, the Open University is providing courses via the [Virtual Campus](#), a secure network accessible by most prisons, with the aim of providing a whole higher education curriculum for prisoners.

Closer to home, the [Tasmanian Prison Service](#) developed a secure network to give incarcerated students access to Moodle - the learning management system used by some institutions.

At the [Alexander Maconochie Centre](#) in the ACT, computers are available in educational centres and in most cells prisoners are allowed to access approved websites containing educational materials and legal resources. This is the only prison in Australia that permits direct access to the internet.

The [University of Southern Queensland](#) is trialing the use of e-learning technologies (tablet computers and a version of the learning management system) that are independent of the internet but still enable students to access courses electronically.

The aim is to give incarcerated students a comparable learning experience to non-incarcerated students and facilitate the development of digital skills that will enhance their employability. The trial is being rolled out across Australia in 2016.

## **Beyond the prison walls**

The increasing reliance on mobile and digital devices for learning further excludes prisoners from access to education. But the delivery of courses via the internet also [affects people](#) living in rural and remote communities, people from low socio-economic backgrounds and those in the developing world where internet access is simply not available.

This is food for thought given that [61%](#) of the world's population is unable to access the internet.

The technical and educational initiatives above give students without internet access, including incarcerated students, the opportunity to benefit from the advantages afforded by digital technologies in [learning and teaching](#).

With prisons becoming increasingly overcrowded as a consequence of the “tough on crime” policies of many politicians, we should be looking at ways of reducing recidivism through providing quality education that adequately prepares prisoners for the outside world.

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*You can read the other articles in the State of Imprisonment series [here](#).*