

Keeping prisoners out of prison: the role of higher education in keeping Aboriginal Australians out of our prison system

An effective way to keep people out of prison is to stop prisoners from reoffending. In Australia, 77% of Aboriginal prisoners have been under sentence previously, as compared to around 50% for non-Aboriginal Australians. Many who end up in prison have had little opportunity to engage with education or have had negative schooling experiences. This is particularly true of Aboriginal prisoners who are half as likely to finish year 12 as non-Aboriginal Australians. With encouragement and support, these people may take the opportunity to engage with education during incarceration.

This paper reports on an Australian-government-funded project, *Making the Connection* which facilitates participation in digital higher education in prisons with a view to reducing recidivism, particularly for Aboriginal Australians. Participation in education can help those incarcerated to develop critical thinking skills, digital literacies and the capacity for self-reflection. In addition, it promotes the prospects for employment on release and promotes positive connection to community and families. This helps reduce the risk of reoffending upon release, by equipping people with the cognitive tools to engage constructively with families, communities and an increasingly digital society.

Most correctional jurisdictions prohibit the use of the internet by prisoners, yet most universities are increasingly reliant on the online provision of programs. This often results in the further marginalisation of those who are already marginalised, including prisoners. The *Making the Connection* project is developing internet-independent digital technologies and a suite of higher education programs that will enable Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal prisoners to engage with higher education.