

Engaging prisoners in education: reducing risk and recidivism

Abstract:

Engaging prisoners in education is one of range of measures that could be implemented to alleviate risk in prisons. For prisoners, the main challenge with incarceration is monotony, often leading to frustration. For many, this manifests as violence, raising the risk of injury for both staff and other prisoners. This paper investigates how prisoner engagement in education can help alleviate risk in prisons, through increasing critical thinking skills and reflection in prisoners, leading to reduced violence.

This presentation concludes with an exploration of a number of projects undertaken by the University of Southern Queensland to introduce digital technologies into prisons to allow access to higher education. The sort of self-paced learning that this allows could lead to reduced costs while promoting digital literacy skills needed for study or the workplace. This increased access to learning could help realise the benefits of reduced risk and decreased recidivism rates.

Text:

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In a recent survey in the UK (2014), some 81% of prisoner respondents claimed that they participated in study to occupy their time and relieve monotony. Some 69% of respondents said that distance education helped them to cope with prison and some 40% said that it helped a lot. This is particularly significant for those prisoners with long sentences or with mental health issues. Though many prisons emphasise vocational education over distance education, particularly higher education, there are many benefits to be realised from engaging prisoners in this way. Education makes prisoners more risk averse. It teaches them to express themselves effectively without having to resort to violence.

There are a number of factors that exacerbate the education challenges of many prisons. The tough on crime policies of many governments contributes to overcrowding of facilities, making prisoner accommodation and movement difficult. Victims' rights groups encourage a public attitude that favours punishment rather than rehabilitation through education. Consequently, there are few objections to massive cuts to education funding in prisons. Reduction in

funding of both corrections and of education has put pressure on correctional education, leading to decreased offerings and shorter duration of programs.

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