

## Tackling Indigenous Incarceration through Engagement with Higher Education

Amnesty International has identified soaring Indigenous incarceration rates as one of the most significant social justice and policy issues for the Australian criminal justice system. Indigenous Australians are 12 times more likely to be in custody than other Australians. A high rate of recidivism for Indigenous offenders contributes significantly to this figure. A tertiary qualification can significantly decrease recidivism rates post-release. However, higher education institutions are increasingly relying on digital technologies that require internet access to support learning and teaching. As a result, students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, particularly Indigenous students, are being progressively excluded from higher education due to their inability to access appropriate technologies and internet access. These factors are greatly exacerbated for Indigenous incarcerated students.

This paper reports on an Australian government HEPPP-funded project, *Making the Connection*, which facilitates participation in digital higher education at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in prisons with a view to reducing recidivism, particularly for Indigenous 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.

Acknowledging that many incarcerated offenders are from low socioeconomic backgrounds and are unlikely to possess all of the skills necessary to successfully undertake higher education, this project facilitates access to the USQ's Indigenous Higher Education Pathways Program (IHEPP) for Indigenous offenders. Successful completion of this program grants immediate entry to USQ's Diploma of Arts (Social Sciences) program, Diploma of Business Administration program, or Diploma of Sciences program, all of which can articulate into degree programs. This combination of programs provides multiple entry points into the pathway for Indigenous incarcerated students, facilitating participation for students with varying degrees of experience, education and digital literacy. This is significant given that Indigenous students are half as likely as non-Indigenous students to complete year 12. Low levels of education remain a key part of the ongoing cycle that leads to the over-representation of Indigenous people in Australian prisons.

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 facilitate participation of incarcerated Indigenous Australians with higher education.