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# Vocational education and training provision and recidivism in Queensland correctional institutions

*Victor Callan*

*John Gardner*

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# Vocational education and training provision and recidivism in Queensland correctional institutions

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER.

## Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Vocational education and training and recidivism in Queensland correctional institutions: Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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# Key messages

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- ✧ In Queensland, about one in five prisoners is participating in some form of vocational education and training (VET) program before release. Being involved in a vocational education program before initial release is associated with a decrease in the chance of offenders returning to custody. Ignoring the potential role of all other factors, offenders who have been involved in VET programs before initial release have a recidivism rate of 23%, compared with 32% for offenders who do not participate in VET programs.
- ✧ Persistent values and cultures in correctional institutions mean many continue to give vocational education and training a low priority. Evidence in this and previous research concerned with the barriers to the provision of education and vocational training shows that Australian correctional systems are still grappling with how to more fully integrate the management of offenders. Nevertheless, many of the key elements needed to develop this more integrated strategy are already in place, such as flexible arrangements within centres that assist offenders to attend VET programs and good levels of cooperation between corrections staff and VET trainers.
- ✧ There is a need for the ongoing development, introduction and enhancement of a wide range of psychological, educational and vocational training programs in prisons. These programs need to target the needs of specific prisoner groups, to provide them with opportunities, to address their personal, social and educational disadvantages, and to help reduce recidivism.

# Executive summary

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This project investigates the nature of vocational education and training (VET) programs being delivered in correctional centres, including the factors assisting or hindering the delivery of these programs to prisoners. The research also statistically determines the factors most associated with reducing the rates of return to prison of offenders (that is, prisoner recidivism).

To address these issues, a brief review of past research was undertaken and interviews with those involved in the corrections system were conducted. The final step of the project involved the examination of various databases to investigate the factors most associated with offender recidivism. To this end, the first part of this report provides a review of Australian and other research into the nature of offenders, and in particular, the links between reduced rates of offender recidivism and access to education, training and employment programs at the pre-release and post-release stages. This is followed by a discussion of the findings from 145 interviews with correctional staff, prisoners and trainers in several Queensland correctional centres. Interviews examined staff and prisoner perceptions of the factors facilitating or acting as barriers to the provision of vocational education and training programs in correctional institutions. The final section of this report uses quantitative methods (a series of cross-tabulations and logistic regression analyses) to examine the characteristics of offenders who become involved in vocational education and training while in prison, and their recidivism rates.

The review of past research reveals that adult offenders in Australia face cumulative social and economic disadvantage relative to the Australian population as a whole, with an average school age of Year 10 or below, training levels well below the Australian average, higher rates of mental illness, and greater rates of unemployment. There is a growing acknowledgement nationally that the corrective services sector has an active role to play in crime prevention by adopting a 'throughcare' strategy, which involves the provision of programs and opportunities addressing the causes of offending, and which maximises the chances of successful re-integration in the community and reduces the risk of re-offending. There is evidence that various jurisdictions in Australia are developing or expanding upon this strategy to achieve more integrated management of offenders throughout their correctional systems.

The interviews with prisoners and staff who work in corrections reveal that both groups believe that the following factors facilitated the provision of vocational education and related programs in centres:

- ✧ the practice of risk assessment upon initial incarceration to allow identification of the most appropriate education and training programs for offenders
- ✧ the adoption of a module-by-module approach in the delivery of training courses
- ✧ the motivation of prisoners to want to complete courses, and related positive perceptions by prisoners about the role that prison staff and trainers play in assisting them
- ✧ the availability and access to dedicated training workshops in correctional centres
- ✧ evidence that vocational training had enhanced the employment of released prisoners.

On the other hand, these same interviews revealed that the perceived barriers to the successful provision of VET programs included:

- ✧ the demands associated with the provision of complete programs dealing with offending behaviour and the perceived lower importance of vocational education and training
- ✧ operational constraints in centres impacting upon prisoners' access to training opportunities
- ✧ the difficulties in managing education and vocational training around the demands of prison work
- ✧ the uncertainty of prisoners being able to complete their training due to prison transfers or early release.

In addition to these barriers were the related training provision challenges experienced in many centres. These included:

- ✧ accessing skilled trainers
- ✧ the cancellation of courses due to a lack of access to trainers
- ✧ the difficulties in managing waiting lists for training and the determination of future training
- ✧ the lack of success in introducing workplace assessment in the prison workshops and on the prison farms.

This study had a particular focus on the experiences of Indigenous offenders. Indigenous prisoners were most likely to continue with VET courses where they had access to one-on-one support from trainers and tutors, and where there were other Indigenous prisoners training with them. VET officers and the Indigenous officers in the correctional centres believed that it was important to recruit trainers from the registered training organisations who were sensitive to the self-esteem issues of many Indigenous prisoners, their low levels of schooling, and the cultural differences between various groups of Indigenous prisoners which required understanding and appropriate management by trainers.

The final part of the study examined the characteristics of prisoners who access VET and the factors that predict lower levels of prisoner recidivism. The initial sample of people analysed consisted of 6021 individuals who were released from prison in Queensland between 1 July 2001 and 30 November 2002. Initially, a series of cross-tabulations compared the characteristics of offenders participating in any VET programs with those who did not participate in VET programs while in a correctional facility. Offenders who had been involved in VET were:

- ✧ less likely to return to community supervision and less likely to return to the corrective system overall
- ✧ more likely to be female
- ✧ more likely to be non-Indigenous
- ✧ more likely to have committed offences involving robbery and extortion, and less likely to have committed offences against good order, such as vagrancy, trespassing and drunkenness
- ✧ more likely to have sentences ranging from one year to ten years
- ✧ more likely to have higher levels of education
- ✧ more likely to be involved in the Post Release Employment Assistance Program and literacy/numeracy programs prior to release
- ✧ more likely, on average, to be younger.

However, while the cross-tabulations do not allow for the possible effects of other factors, logistic regression analyses do provide findings that statistically control for the effects of other variables in the sample, and those results indicate the unique contribution of each variable, after



correcting for the effects of all other variables. The analyses revealed that a combination of factors successfully predicted recidivism. More specifically, those prisoners who had greater chances of returning to the corrections system were more likely: to have shorter initial sentences; to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and to be convicted of property offences and offences against good order. Those offenders less likely to return: were older; had higher levels of education (especially Year 12 or beyond); were convicted of robbery/extortion or drug offences; and had participated in VET programs before their initial release. Depending on the measure of recidivism used (two measures were used in this report), the analyses showed a drop of either 24% or 28% in the rate of recidivism associated with involvement by offenders in VET programs.

There are several implications to emerge from the findings of this report, most important of which is the need to continue efforts to promote to offenders, and to those who work in correctional centres, the value of vocational education and training as a major strategy for achieving the successful re-integration of released offenders back into the worlds of work, family and community. Moreover, it is important to continue to identify and resolve the operational barriers negatively impacting upon the provision of vocational education and training in correctional centres. A major challenge is the achievement of a more integrated prisoner management system. The key elements in this system include stronger links and improved coordination between the use of offender induction programs, offender risk needs assessment, offending behaviour and educational and training programs, and pre-release or transition programs. The establishment of links between these programs and the transition of prisoners into pre-release employment programs near the end of their sentences also appears to be critical.

Finally, due to their shorter sentences, many offenders are ineligible to access VET programs. However, the analyses showed that offenders with shorter initial sentences are more likely to return to the corrective system than those with longer initial sentences. A key issue for further debate is the value in expanding the levels of access to VET for these offenders.

# Background and approach

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## Research background

The *National strategy for vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia* (ANTA 2001) aims to achieve, as part of its vision, a situation where vocational education and training (VET) is an integral component of offender management and the programs and services provided to offenders. Objectives include improving the pathways to vocational education and training, client-focused training, and links between offender education and training and employment opportunities. However, there are many characteristics of the correctional system and offenders that need to be better understood and managed if any headway is to be made towards achieving these objectives.

The current research was motivated by the objectives of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA 2001) national strategy for offenders, and the need to understand the factors that are facilitating, and also those holding back, the effective delivery of education and training programs for prisoners in correctional institutions. A major focus was upon evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, that the provision of VET and related opportunities was reducing the likelihood of prisoners re-offending upon release. More specifically, the project:

- ✧ used a brief literature review to identify relevant past research that would inform and guide the current project
- ✧ gained an understanding of how VET operates in the prison context and its supports and constraints on VET through interviews with departmental staff who manage VET in prisons, and with prisoners
- ✧ used existing databases within the Queensland Department of Corrective Services to describe the nature of VET programs in the Queensland correctional system, and the nature of prisoners accessing such programs
- ✧ used, employing the same databases, logistic regression to test statistically the links between involvement in VET in prison and recidivism rates for different types of prisoners.

## Research questions

The project addressed the following research questions:

- ✧ What is the nature of VET programs being delivered in correctional centres, including the modes of delivery and modules, and the factors assisting or hindering delivery to prisoners?
- ✧ Does involvement in VET by various types of prisoners reduce their rates of recidivism?
- ✧ What are the multiple disadvantages faced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders in correctional institutions?

# Methodology

## Literature review

A brief review of past research in both Australia and overseas was undertaken to inform this current project and provide comparisons which would further elucidate the findings from the project.

## Interviews with prisoners and correctional staff

Queensland was selected as a pilot state to examine the nature of VET in prisons, with the expectation that a larger national study may be commissioned in the future. This project was supported as part of the nationally managed program of VET research funded by ANTA and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). The Queensland Department of Corrective Services (Adult Education, Vocational Education and Training Branch, Program Services) provided considerable support in arranging visits to correctional centres, access to databases and technical support for analyses of those databases. Several officers of the department provided constructive feedback on the first interim report and the final draft report. Other assistance came from the Queensland Department of Employment and Training which supports the delivery of VET in Queensland prisons through its partnership with the Queensland Department of Corrective Services.

During September and October 2004, the investigators completed all interviews with correctional staff and prisoners across seven correctional institutions in Queensland. The centres were chosen to be representative of the broad range of correctional institutions, including centres that reflected the full range of prisoner classifications, access to both male and female offenders, and access to offenders of Indigenous backgrounds. Centres visited included: Wolston Correctional Centre and the Women's Correctional Centre, both located about 30 minutes from Brisbane; Palen Creek Correctional Centre, a prison farm located two hours south-west of Brisbane; Capricornia Correctional Centre in Rockhampton, and the Correctional Centre Farm, located outside the main gaol; Townsville Correctional Centre in northern Queensland, the Townsville Correctional Women's Centre, located next to the main gaol, and Townsville Correctional Centre Farm located about five kilometres from the main prison. The centres in Rockhampton and Townsville were visited as they have high proportions of Indigenous offenders. Female offenders in secure custodial care are located at only two centres, Brisbane Women's and at Townsville, and so both centres were visited.

The sub-groups of respondents that made up the interviews were:

- ✧ fifty Indigenous male and female offenders who were identified by program staff in the centres as being of Indigenous background, and as accessing VET programs currently or in the past
- ✧ sixty non-Indigenous male and female prisoners in the same correctional centres
- ✧ twenty-six correctional staff (VET training officers, education officers, programs staff, correctional officers, sentence management staff, managers)
- ✧ five Department of Corrective Services staff managing or overseeing the VET programs
- ✧ four public and private registered training organisation staff who were in the centres delivering VET training.

The main method of data collection was the use of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with individual respondents. On other occasions, within the operational constraints of the prison, it was most efficient to complete interviews with small groups of staff (while prisoners were in lock-down or participating in programs), and with small groups of prisoners before or after a

training program (groups varied in size from two to eight prisoners). One-on-one interviews were completed in 30 minutes with prisoners, and 45 to 60 minutes with individual corrections staff. Small group interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour with prisoners, and one to two hours with corrections staff. Because prisoners selected for interviews were currently participating in, or had recently accessed programs, and were identified by staff, their views may be more positive than a random sample of prisoners located across the centres. However, one of the researchers also visited units to talk to prisoners on a more random basis, enabling access to those who had rejected all attempts to encourage them to undertake study or training while in prison.

Interviews provide rich qualitative information, in this instance allowing an exploration of the beliefs and perceptions of correctional staff, departmental staff, VET staff and prisoners, on the nature, utility and performance of VET training programs in correctional centres. Interviews with prisoners enabled the interviewer to vary questions to suit the language skills of participants. Interview notes were taken as it was not feasible to audiotape interviews in the prison environments. It needs to be noted that, due to the need to follow prison policy linked to personal security, VET or education officers or the trainer from the registered training organisation were in attendance or in sight during the interviews with prisoners.

At the same time, these individuals had good rapport with prisoners, and played a key role in encouraging prisoners to participate in the interviews. The interviewer explained that these correctional officers or staff were nearby due to the need to follow the policy of the correctional centre. It was stated prior to the interview that prisoners had the right to refuse not to be interviewed, that all information was in strictest confidence, and that no names or identifying information would be attached to the interview notes. No person within Queensland Corrections would see any interview notes. If prisoners did not feel comfortable answering questions in front of correctional staff or other prisoners, prisoners had the right to leave, or to stay and to not answer questions. In all interviews, the investigator began with a brief explanation of the research, an overview of the key questions being addressed, and details about the progress to date in the research, and the correctional institutions that had been visited. Appendix A in the support document available at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>> provides a summary of the interview questions for offenders.

A number of other questions emerged with different groups of prisoners, especially issues related to the timing of programs; programs being postponed due to insufficient numbers of prisoners or unavailability of suitable trainers; the extent to which prisoners helped each other on programs; and issues concerned with 'shame' for Indigenous prisoners. Interviews typically finished with a general discussion about the nature of the economy outside, and the good prospects for employment given the state of the economy. Prisoners were also interested to hear about the plans to roll out the pre-release/post-release employment program, currently being offered in some correctional centres, into their own and other correctional institutions in Queensland.

In the interviews, the researcher did not spend time asking questions about the educational background or prior work experiences of prisoners for two reasons. First, as a number of the sessions took the form of group interviews, it was considered inappropriate to embarrass prisoners by asking them to disclose their educational and work histories. Secondly, the analyses of the corrections database of this research provided sufficient opportunity to examine these educational and background characteristics in considerable detail for the total prison population.

Appendix A also lists the interview questions for corrections staff. These interviews often concluded with a general discussion of the logistical issues that had to be managed as the interviewer moved across the prison to access different groups of prisoners between their attendance at programs, musters, workshop duties and meals.

## Analysis of corrections databases

The current project also accessed a number of computer databases in the Queensland Department of Corrective Services. More details are provided in the supporting document about the nature of these databases, and how they were interrogated. In particular, the supporting document provides details about the:

- ✧ characteristics of the sample used for the recidivism analyses (appendix B)
- ✧ characteristics of VET and non-VET participants (appendix C)
- ✧ characteristics of recidivists (appendices D and E)
- ✧ results of the logistic regression analyses (appendix F).

# Prisoner disadvantage and VET experiences

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## The national VET strategy for adult offenders

It is important to state from the outset that there can exist a clash of philosophies in relation to the predominantly equity paradigm that underpins the ANTA (2001) national strategy for VET for adult prisoners, and the philosophies of the state correctional systems and correctional centres which manage prisoners. The ANTA national strategy describes a vision in which offenders have an understanding of their vocational education and training options and know how they can participate and set realistic goals to achieve their VET pathways. In particular, the ANTA vision sees VET as an integral component of prisoner management and the programs and services provided to offenders. The national strategy focuses upon the themes of access, participation and attainment, employment and lifelong learning by offenders, and accountability.

On the other hand, Noonan (2004) among many others, has highlighted the importance of the need to understand VET in prisons within the context of the current and future policy basis underpinning the relationships between the VET sector and the corrections systems. He argues that how a corrections system views rehabilitation, and its responsibilities to prisoners while in and outside prison, strongly influence the policy of correctional departments and their institutions towards training and in creating pathways. In many correctional contexts, many of those working in the correctional system still view their role to be primarily concerned with incarceration rather than rehabilitation. The focus is upon the present, and the safe and secure management of prisoners while in a correctional institution. The preparation of prisoners for their future life upon release is of secondary or even little importance among these corrections staff, especially those staff who operate as correctional officers facing the daily challenges of managing large numbers of prisoners, some of whom are violent and dangerous offenders.

In a number of countries, however, many aspects of the ANTA vision and philosophy about the provision of VET to adult offenders are being lived out in the emerging philosophy of 'throughcare' (see Borzycki & Baldry 2003). This philosophy focuses upon a wider, and more integrated program of rehabilitation, education and training, designed to meet the needs of prisoners both before and after release. Areas of need identified as important include helping prisoners re-integrate financially and socially back into communities (for example, providing training, skills development and prison-based employment in correctional centres); assistance in finding employment post-release; physical considerations (for example, providing secure and comfortable housing for prisoners); and the provision of assistance in renewing the relationships between offenders and their families after their release.

Finally, a recent report by the Australian Government Productivity Commission (2004) provides a profile of the corrective services of various jurisdictions, including policy developments and performance indicators. This report noted that:

- ✧ While the management of prisoners and those serving community corrections orders is the business of all corrective service agencies, the scope of responsibilities varies considerably across jurisdictions.

- ✧ There is a growing acknowledgement nationally that the corrective services sector has an active role to play in crime prevention, especially by providing programs and opportunities that address the causes of offending, maximise the chances of successful re-integration in the community, and reduce the risk of re-offending.
- ✧ The Australian correctional system is increasingly recognising the complexity of the circumstances and needs of prisoners, including unresolved drug and alcohol problems, backgrounds of social disadvantage, low educational attainment, poor employment history, significant health problems, and limited family and social skills.
- ✧ That various jurisdictions are developing or expanding upon a ‘throughcare’ strategy (New South Wales), or ‘end-to-end’ strategy (Queensland) or a ‘re-entry co-ordination service delivery model’ (Western Australia) for the integrated management of offenders throughout the correctional system.

As a result of these policy developments, one feature of this current report will be various observations about how much a throughcare, rather than a traditional correctional philosophy, is emerging in the correctional centres under study in this report.

## Prisoners’ experiences of disadvantage

### Sources of disadvantage

People who are imprisoned experience the disadvantaged status of a minority group. A minority group has less privilege, power, and status and suffers more cumulative disadvantage than majority groups in our societies (see Callan 1986). Prisoners fall into the category of being a behavioural minority, in that they have engaged in behaviour that is at variance with societal laws and norms. National and international literatures on corrections show that prisoners, relative to the general population, are confronted with an extensive range of multiple disadvantages, which include poor health and poor education, accompanied by drug, alcohol and mental health issues, poor social and communication skills, and in many cases, some level of intellectual disability (see Social Extension Unit 2002; Ward 2001). We know that adult offenders in Australia face cumulative social and economic disadvantage relative to the Australian population as a whole, with an average school age of Year 10 or below, training levels being well below the Australian average, higher rates of mental illness and greater rates of unemployment. Reports by the Australian Council for Social Service (2002) and the Australian Government Productivity Commission (2004) highlight the significant impact of unemployment upon the health of individuals, on opportunities to seek affordable housing, and upon the likelihood of committing crime.

Most recently, ANTA has highlighted how prisoners and ex-prisoners face employment discrimination and reduced job opportunities due to limited levels of education and training. Many strategies at local, state and national levels are being put in place to assist prisoners while in the correctional system to improve their chances of successful integration back into their families, the world of work, and their communities. *Shaping our future: National strategy for VET 2004–2010* (ANTA 2004) and the *National strategy for vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia* (ANTA 2001) are at least two approaches being adopted at national levels to resolve many of these sources of cumulative disadvantage being experienced by adult offenders.

### Prisoner diversity

The prison population is a highly diverse one. Overall, governments in their efforts to assist ex-prisoners have not fully appreciated how different types of prisoners have very different experiences of social and economic disadvantage. Willis and Rushforth (2003), for example, argue

that, prior to the 1970s, women prisoners were virtually invisible to researchers and policy-makers. The main offences for women that lead to imprisonment continue to be drug offences, assault and robbery. Males are more likely to be incarcerated for assault, robbery and unlawful entry with intent (ABS 2002, 2003). Significantly, although the number of women in Australian prisons is low relative to the number of males, there has been a 95% increase in the number of female offenders between 1992 and 2002.

Overseas and Australian research identifies similar outcomes for female offenders. The United Kingdom Home Office (2000) has reported that female prisoners need more help than male prisoners with basic skills, education, job-seeking skills, and support for finding work on release. Canadian and United States studies support this conclusion (see Borzycki & Baldry 2003; Richie 2001). Similarly, the Department of Corrective Services (2000) report, *Profile of female offenders under community and custodial supervision in Queensland*, found that a high proportion of female offenders are unemployed upon entry to custodial and community settings. Only 14% of female prisoners report being employed. The majority of female offenders in Australian prisons have an education level between Years 8 and 10.

On a more positive note, it is established that general and vocational education in women's prisons which is focused on communication and numerical skills improves their chances of finding employment (Home Office 2000). However, training is very often only available for traditional female occupations, while many females upon release continue to show a lack of assertiveness in their job-seeking and the range of jobs they seek out (Case & Fasenfest 2004).

Another feature of prison populations in most countries is the over-representation of individuals from Indigenous communities. Until relatively recently, again as further evidence of a failure to respond to the diversity of offenders, correctional systems in most countries have not provided any specialised programs and strategies to assist their Indigenous prisoners. Indigenous people, however, are among the most disadvantaged in our prison populations. Indigenous offenders in Australia are over-represented in our prisons, and more than 30% of offenders in our prisons are Aboriginal. Indigenous prison populations in Australia have grown faster than non-Indigenous prison populations in all jurisdictions. Over time, the rate of growth in the number of Indigenous prisoners is 1.7 times the average annual growth of the non-Indigenous prison population (Carcach, Grant & Conroy 1999).

We know that Indigenous prisoners are most likely to be at the worst end of the education and skills profile, in terms of Year 10 or less education and little or no training or skills development prior to prison. In addition, Indigenous offenders upon release find it hard to locate suitable accommodation and employment. Indigenous job seekers have unemployment rates of 20% or more (see ABS 2002, 2003; Department of Employment and Training 2002). Many Indigenous prisoners want to return to their local communities upon release, but those communities have high unemployment rates and return the prisoners to 'at risk' situations, so increasing the likelihood of re-offending. More recent research (Giles et al. 2004) reveals that men and prisoners of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent were less likely to expect good work prospects, irrespective of their in-prison activities.

It is the combination of factors, known as intersectionality, that makes it difficult for many Indigenous prisoners to break the cycle of release, re-offending and re-arrest (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2003). This intersectionality is well demonstrated in the criminal trajectory of Indigenous young offenders. Gender and Indigenous status intensifies the risk of maintaining a criminal career from youth into adulthood. Nearly 90% of Indigenous males who served a supervised juvenile order in 1994–95 progressed to adult corrections, compared with about 78% of non-Indigenous males. Indigenous females were also more likely than non-Indigenous females to enter the adult correctional system (Lynch, Buckman & Krenske 2003).



The combination of being Indigenous and female also heightens the chances of imprisonment. If we examine statistics for Queensland, for example, the report, *Profile of female offenders under community and custodial supervision in Queensland* (2000), indicates that Indigenous women are over-represented in custody. They have very high health and mental needs, and a high proportion of Indigenous females are unemployed upon entry to custodial and community settings.

## The VET experience in Australian prisons

A number of previous Australian reports have documented the realities of planning the delivery of VET in correctional institutions. Hunt (2003), for example, in her review of the operation of VET across 12 Western Australian prisons provides an excellent review that highlights the reality of corrections shaping VET in prisons (see also similar observations of Australian prisons by Cameron 2001; Giles et al. 2004; Wilson & Penaluna 1995; Semmens 1996). She found that:

- ✧ At an operational level, VET delivery remains secondary to the main purpose of prison systems in securing offenders and ensuring community safety.
- ✧ Prison-based VET delivery operates within a wider system which means that VET is open to socio-political trends and economic pressures that impact upon the timing, delivery and presence or otherwise of certain VET programs.
- ✧ VET delivery operates in a piecemeal way, given the operational and funding constraints, and the wide diversity of prisons and types of prisoners.
- ✧ Individual prison programs can operate in isolation of what is occurring in other prisons, making the management of pathways highly problematic for individual prisoners.
- ✧ Prisons have demands to operate prison workshops with commercial contracts to complete, and do not have the staff to allocate to providing a standard of workplace assessment to meet Australian Quality Training Framework criteria.

In more detail, a number of studies have described the VET experience in various Australian states. In a large interview study of prisoners in correctional centres in Western Australia, Giles and her colleagues (2004) described the education and training experiences of those in correctional institutions. They found that prisoners make choices within the constraints of sentence management plans developed when they enter prison, the demands and flexibility of their prison jobs and the availability of courses. Their interviews with prisoners showed that prison education and training were more than just 'time fillers'. Prisoners have very busy lives, and about half of sampled prisoners reported involvement in studies, ranging from short courses to completing industry-recognised qualifications.

In a review of VET in Queensland corrections, Cox and Carlin (1998) found that prisoners believed that involvement in VET provided a positive learning experience. VET studies had resulted in great personal satisfaction, improved self-esteem, and had encouraged them to undertake further study while in prison. VET and literacy skills had helped prisoners to be able to read books, write letters and to use computers in ways that would help them to get jobs and assist their own children upon release. Some 84% of prisoners believed that the skills learned through the VET programs would help them to gain employment. Like reviews in other Australian correctional systems (Cameron 2001; Giles et al. 2004; Semmens 1996), this Queensland review noted that more emphasis was needed on providing offenders with continuity of VET. However, often VET studies were disrupted with movements between prisons and across classification levels (that is, prisoners over time can be reclassified to lower levels of risk). The pathway needed to facilitate more successful progression from basic entry-level training to more advanced training.

One Victorian study (Pitman & Tregambe 1997) reported many similar findings to these Western Australian and Queensland reports. In this Victorian review of the appropriateness of vocational

education and training in Victorian prisons, VET was found to play a significant role in improving prisoners' access to the labour market and to the pursuit of further education and training. Prisoners also believed that VET improved their chances of work. It assisted them to develop skills that would be useful in their work and personal lives. Also, they believed that the VET courses had allowed them to train in work they wanted to undertake upon release. However, upon release, many of these Victorian prisoners only gained unskilled work, and work that was often not permanent.

While VET programs in these Victorian prisons were providing prisoners with vocational skills, upon release many prisoners were employed in jobs that were not their preferred work, and not related to their training in prison (see also Callan 2004 about similar findings for Queensland prisoners upon release). Those prisoners most likely to get work upon release had considerable post-release support, mostly from friends and family. This Victorian report also noted that there was a lack of adequately trained support staff who could be accessed upon release. Importantly, those individuals needed to be trained to understand the complex set of personal, economic and social problems that confronted prisoners upon release.

In other research from Victoria relating to the education and training needs of prisoners, Bearing Point (2003) provides findings similar to those reported above. The questionnaire survey sample from the study consisted of a variety of male and female offender groups in Victorian correctional facilities. The report found that prisoner attitudes were a major factor in shaping a willingness to be involved in education and training in correctional centres. Those prisoners under 25 years or over 65 years, and prisoners on longer sentences were more likely to be involved in study while in prison. The report noted major variations in completion rates in education and training by offenders between correctional centres. The report described various administrative factors also hindering prisoner access to VET, and concluded that the Victorian correctional system needed to develop further its philosophy and focus upon the use of education and training in prisons to reduce crime, and to increase the employment and societal adjustment of prisoners upon release.

In other Australian research, Cameron (2001) found that prisoners regard educational classes highly and consider training necessary for their integration back into society. There are multiple reasons why prisoners enrol in educational and training programs, including the desire to do something constructive with their time; to improve their knowledge and skills and so chances of jobs and a better life upon release; to avoid going to work in the prison workshops; and because education and training was recommended by the internal committee in prison that managed the prisoner's sentence or reviews of their classification level. Cameron also observed that a key challenge for prison management is not merely training people, but also preparing offenders for work in areas with good levels of demand in the outside labour market.

However, Australia is not unique in these VET experiences. Other countries face similar challenges with the provision of VET in prisons. In a review in the United Kingdom of offender education and training (Uden 2003), it was concluded that funding was not only inadequate, but also rapidly declining. Vocational training was being run using equipment that no longer reflected industrial standards and that could not fully support the teaching program. There was little funding for upgrading of equipment and for information and related technologies that supported training. Furthermore, the trend to turn training workshops into commercial workshops was reducing the number of training opportunities for prisoners. Prisoners and correctional officers gave low priority to training, by comparison with other programs. There were perceived conflicts between the desire to deliver training and the competing opportunities available to prisoners to engage in prison duties (for example, jobs in the kitchen, gardening, library assistants) or workshops which offered them wages for their work.

## Psychological, educational and training programs and prisoner recidivism

Unfortunately, the prison experience does not alter the offending behaviours of all prisoners. Australian figures indicate that around 58% of the over 22 000 sentenced and unsentenced individuals incarcerated as at 30 June 2002 had been previously imprisoned (ABS 2003). The Australian Productivity Commission (2004) reported a national recidivism rate of 37% of prisoners returning to prison within two years of release, and 47% returning to corrective services (either prisons or community corrections).

As many reports have noted, the costs of crime are well quantified (see Mayhew 2003), and reducing recidivism rates benefits the whole community, especially as ex-prisoners can contribute productively to community life and to the lives of their own families. A key focus of the correctional system is altering offenders' behaviours through incarceration, as well as through the use of psychological, educational and training programs targeting the factors that influence offender behaviours.

Meta-analyses of published research show that programs in prisons that operate from a psychological basis produce better outcomes than those that do not. These programs target the psychological factors that can be managed, and that are linked to the offending behaviour. In Queensland corrections, the offending behaviour programs are a very good example of such theory-driven programs. In a review of a large number of evaluation studies across various countries, Howells and Day (1999) report strong evidence of links between successful completion of offending behaviour programs and rehabilitation. For instance, in reviews of research in the United Kingdom, prisoners who have attended such programs re-offend 10–36% less than those who do not attend programs. In their review of research in the United States, Howells and Day found that treatment effectiveness varied from 50–86%. In their review of 35 Canadian studies, all but two demonstrated reduced recidivism.

However, as noted earlier, there is considerable diversity in prison populations. The impact of prison programs varies according to offenders' demographic and criminogenic profiles. Several variables reduce the chances of re-offending, and in particular, crime rates diminish with age and changes in work and personal lives. For example, marriage, stable employment and abstinence from drugs together are associated with reduced crime among prisoners in various longitudinal studies (for example, Ouimet & Le Blanc 1996). A study of prison boot camps in the United States (Russo-Lleras 2003) found similar interactive effects. That is, the most effective programs in reducing recidivism used vocational training, educational classes and therapeutic groups. They also included a strong post-release supervision component with an employment services component. Other reviews reveal that, by comparison with younger offenders, for many offenders in their late twenties and older, getting a job is a turning point away from a life of crime (Uggen 2000).

A key part of this research will be to examine the hypothesis that involvement in VET while in prison increases prisoners' skills, increases their chances for employment, and in turn reduces their chances of re-offending upon release. The central premise is that training and employment opportunities in prison, with their focus on concrete skills training, the development and enhancement of technical and more generic skills, and the likely transfer of these skills to outside employment, offer real potential for change among offenders.

A number of international reviews demonstrate the effects of education and training programs upon recidivism. Adult academic and vocational correctional education programs lead to fewer disciplinary violations during imprisonment, to reduced recidivism, increased employment opportunities, and increased participation in education opportunities upon release (Gerber & Fritsch 1995). Other research reveals a number of positive results for those who receive

vocational training while incarcerated, including higher levels of employment upon release and fewer arrests post-release (Harer 1994; Gillis and Associates 1998; Gillis 1999; Gordon & Weldon 2003). The United States-based three-state recidivism study (Steurer, Smith & Tracy 2001) found that prisoners who participated in education programs while incarcerated showed lower rates of recidivism. Also, employment data upon release indicated that those who had completed such education programs received higher wages. In a recent update of this research, Steurer and Smith (2003) continue to report that correctional education participants have statistically significant lower rates of re-arrest, re-conviction and re-incarceration.

In their review of a mix of Australian and international studies, Semmens and Oldfield (1999) concluded that VET in prison does improve access to employment, and lowers recidivism (see also Cameron 2001). However, they argue that few studies identify how VET actually assists prisoners and how we might overcome the difficulties that affect the motivation of prisoners to participate in programs. In another Australian study, Duffy (2004) has recently completed a comparison of the programs and practices developed and implemented to assist ex-prisoners to gain employment in Australia. This report concluded that the Australian states most actively engaged in employment for prisoners upon release were Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia.

Overall, the research evidence on programs and recidivism reveals that:

- ✧ There is great difficulty in determining what specific parts of the interventions make the most difference in reducing crime (Bushway & Reuter 2000).
- ✧ Few education and training programs in Australia have been evaluated to determine their effects upon encouraging prisoner rehabilitation and in reducing recidivism (Cameron 2001).
- ✧ Mixed-strategy programs that combine a variety of services are particularly important when it comes to serving the needs of the most disadvantaged job seekers, such as ex-offenders (Strawn 1999).
- ✧ More successful programs, as judged by their ability to increase participants' earnings over time, combine job search services with a range of tailored services, including education, job training, on-the-job training and follow-up support (Strawn 1999). More successful programs, again as judged by their ability to increase participants' earnings over time, offer follow-up after release, post-release counselling, attract appropriate clients, and teach skills relevant to the job market (Flanagan 1994; Gainous 1992).
- ✧ Only high-quality jobs, satisfying employment or jobs with adequate hours and pay leading to viable work careers, truly reduce recidivism (Uggen 1999).

# Findings from interviews

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## Factors facilitating the provision of VET in prisons

### Correctional policy

It is important to note that correctional policy states what programs are available to certain types of prisoners. In Queensland prisons, rehabilitation or offending behaviour programs and VET and other programs are not available to prisoners who are on remand or who are serving sentences of less than 12 months. Offending behaviour programs are rehabilitation programs that address the criminogenic factors and are cognitive and behaviour-based. Exceptions do apply concerning involvement for high-risk sentenced prisoners, especially in female centres where the average sentence length for offenders is less than 12 months. Indigenous prisoners receive access to mainstream programs as well as Indigenous programs (for example, literacy and numeracy programs, work readiness, Murri Art), even if their sentence is less than 12 months. Non-Indigenous male prisoners with sentences under one year are very unlikely to get access to VET programs. This policy gives correctional centres guidelines to assist them in determining how they will manage the considerable demands of their offending behaviour, education and VET programs, and the effective management of their waiting lists for all programs.

### Risk assessment and targeting of programs

In many corrections systems in Australia and elsewhere, new prisoners are assessed in terms of their offender risk and needs. This assessment technique (described as Offender Risk Needs Inventory in Queensland) designates certain characteristics as criminogenic (for example, criminal history, illiteracy, substance abuse). Through interviews with newly arrived prisoners and other supporting materials, an assessment is made of the criminogenic factors present in each prisoner, and the degree of severity. These results place each prisoner into a high, medium or low category, and assign him or her to treatment programs targeted at reducing the criminogenic factor or factors to a level that places the individual in a lower-risk group. This issue of risk assessment goes hand-in-hand with decisions about the types of educational, training and offending behaviour programs that prisoners will undertake during their period of incarceration. Another tool that emerges from this and related processes is an initial education and training plan determined by interviews with each prisoner, conducted by psychologists, education officers and VET officers who, respectively, recommend specific offending behaviour, educational and VET programs for each offender.

Centres reported completion rates of 80% or better for VET modules, and it is felt that a number of specific procedures and action strategies were seen to be behind these high completion rates. Firstly, the risk assessment and related initial sentence management plan for each prisoner were being used very explicitly to determine the offending behaviour, educational and VET programs required by offenders. In addition, the six-monthly sentence management reviews provided updates on the prisoner's progress. At sentence management reviews, prisoners were being asked why they dropped out. VET officers reported that the major reasons were an inability to pick up

the skill, despite the prisoner's best efforts; trouble back home with partners and families which had upset or depressed the prisoner; and problems over their sentences (for example, a poor outcome with the Parole Board or a sentence management review) which had also de-motivated them.

In Queensland and other prisons, it is usual for a sentence management unit to regularly review a prisoner's progress. In Queensland centres, this review happens every six months. The successful completion of the offending behaviour programs which focus upon their offending behaviour (for example, reducing an offender's high levels of impulsiveness, poor control of anger, aberrant sexual behaviours) influences decisions about the prisoner's reclassification, and progress towards possible parole. Prisoners can choose not to do these offending behaviour programs determined by the sentence management unit. In Queensland such offending behaviour programs as they are called include programs to encourage prisoners to re-think the impact of their crime upon their victims and to develop more empathy and become less impulsive, and to develop better decision-making skills (Cognitive Skills program). Other offending behaviour programs are directed at aggression and anger (Anger Management program); and offending sexual behaviour (Sex Offenders program) or drug and alcohol awareness.

Education programs in correctional institutions focus upon improving literacy and numeracy levels, through to assisting prisoners with access to technical and further education (TAFE) level diplomas and university degrees through distance learning. VET programs can be completed within the prison or through distance learning. These programs in Queensland prisons in 2004 and 2005 included certificates in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) visual arts, outdoor power tools, business, computer-aided drafting, engineering, first aid, furnishing, hospitality, transport and distribution, and workplace preparation and practices.

## Module-by-module approach

Various training packages were being used to deliver units of competency that typically were part of certificate I or II qualifications. The same units were popular among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders, and Indigenous offenders also accessed an accredited program in Indigenous art. Overall, the most frequently accessed units of competency were for first aid, followed by units of competency for certificates in engineering, business, horticulture, and information technology. Within the centres, prisoners and corrections staff talked about these units as modules. The module-by-module approach allowed centres to select modules that were expected to be more appropriate to prisoners' needs for specific training for employment. In addition, there was widespread advertising of forthcoming VET modules in the residential and secure units in centres. In one centre, this promotion was tied to an 'education expo' in which registered training organisations and universities offering training gave presentations about VET, traineeships and apprenticeships, and distance learning. Other centres used an education induction program which oriented new prisoners to the purpose and availability of VET and education programs. Where they had libraries, materials about VET and other programs were also made available. Programs were also being promoted to custodial officers more actively than in the past.

Prisoners who had successfully completed earlier modules in the qualification were actively followed up, and alerted that more training was becoming available. Prisoners were interviewed to check their motivations for wanting to undertake the training, as well as to make clear the centre's expectations about the training. Courses were promoted as a privilege that needed to be taken seriously by prisoners, with the implication that a dropout for unjustified reasons would affect their future success in applying for other VET courses. In some centres, the prisoners signed a 'psychological contract' in which they indicated that they understood the requirements they had to meet to attend the training and for its successful completion. Daily attendance rolls were taken, and prisoners who did not attend were sought out and questioned about their reasons

for non-attendance. Some VET officers also talked about ‘picking the eyes out of the waiting lists’. They linked the lists to other information they had about release dates and parole, so that they could give every advantage to prisoners who were coming up for a hearing at the Parole Board.

VET modules were organised in innovative ways. They were run to minimise disruption to prison work (for example, laundries, kitchens, and commercial workshops) or attendance at offending behaviour programs (for example, cognitive skills, drug and alcohol addiction, sex offender behaviours, and anger management). Prisoner interest and motivation was maintained by running VET modules quite intensively, often five days a week, with three hours per day. Furthermore, new policies were being applied which allowed prisoners to be absent from the commercial workshops or other prison work for two sessions a week.

The application of these procedures has produced a generally very well-motivated group of learners in the VET programs. In particular, an offending behaviour group of longer-serving prisoners has gained substantially from the VET programs. Some longer-serving prisoners, for example, reported that they ‘have done every program on offer’. They had at least certificate I, possibly even level II qualifications, as well as a large number of VET modules across numerous qualifications. For example, one prisoner reported that he had completed occupational health and safety, hygiene/kitchen training, power tools, computing, first aid, the blue certificate for construction work, forklift, and a Certificate I in Engineering. Most of the longer-serving prisoners provided similar lists of achievements, and like the prisoner above, many were confused about the standing of what they had completed (for example, a module, a certificate, a level of attainment, the actual level of the certificate, or if it was a ticket). Nevertheless, the education files kept by centres ensured that an accurate record was kept of training completed by prisoners while in custodial care.

One concern, however, is that those less motivated prisoners, or those with behavioural problems that preclude them from VET, are not being given sufficient access to VET. The regular reviews of the sentence management plan do ensure that many different types of prisoners do access VET once they demonstrate improved behaviours and evidence that they are committed to altering their offending behaviours (for example, through the successful completion of offending behaviour programs in areas like anger management or cognitive skills).

As noted, correctional centres have adopted a module-by-module approach to training. The overwhelming majority of prisoners who leave the correctional system do not leave with a completed certificate I, II or III qualifications. Rather, they leave with official recognition by the registered training organisation of the completion of various modules, often across a variety of qualifications, as well as completion of tickets that allow operation of forklifts, the ‘blue worksite’ certificate required to work on construction sites, and similar certificates of completion. As a number of VET and education officers concluded, the constraints that exist in prisons have resulted in the delivery of a broad VET program of skill development rather than programs focused upon skills for specific jobs.

A number of centres, however, were planning, from 2005, to pilot the introduction of various certificate III qualifications. This development is judged to be a large financial and time commitment by the Queensland Department of Corrective Services and the Queensland Department of Employment and Training. The introduction of certificates IIIs is a response to the training needs of longer-serving prisoners who have proven their motivation and commitment to training by completing earlier modules. Also in 2005, at least one correctional centre will be re-positioning its VET programs so that a number of job areas for female prisoners are targeted, including computing and hospitality. This approach contrasts with the more general approach to training. Again, developments in the job market and offender demand were driving these developments.

## Positive offender motivations

As mentioned earlier, for those prisoners undertaking VET, there were few motivational problems. High completion rates demonstrated their commitment. They usually had to wait for a program, and this further motivated them. Once it commenced, they felt that they were fortunate in being able to access the training. The most obvious motivating factor among prisoners was the sense of achievement in developing a new skill. By contrast with many learning experiences at school, they were successful in completing the course. They felt that they had received a high standard of training from very knowledgeable and very accommodating trainers. Prisoners were undertaking training they would have to pay for on the outside, and the course was broadening the range of jobs they might be able to access upon release.

Another set of motivations was related to social and personal needs. They were getting away from their units and meeting other prisoners from other parts of the centre; they were escaping the boredom of their units where prisoners either talked noisily, slept much of the day, or spent hours on play stations, playing cards or watching television—as ‘doers’, as many described themselves, away from their units being busy and productive. In addition, prisoners’ learning styles were oriented around doing and seeing the end results of their work as soon as possible. VET modules were especially attractive because they allowed a more hands-on approach to learning, and the benefits were normally immediately recognisable.

Staff in correctional centres, especially VET and education officers, took considerable care in recognising the achievements of students who completed a module or a full qualification. Module completers were provided with the official record of their achievement from the registered training organisation which had been funded to resource the training, and graduation ceremonies were held to recognise the achievements of prisoners who had completed a qualification. Centres had adopted a policy of keeping copies of this documentation in prisoner education files so that prisoners had replacement copies if required. These files were useful where prisoners re-offended, and upon re-incarceration, their files had copies of certificates that prisoners may have lost after release.

However, the prisoners undertaking the VET programs believed that they were a minority in the prison. The majority of prisoners completed offending behaviour programs only, and they were the only programs seen to increase their chances of parole. These prisoners commented that they were not willing to work with the system. As reported a number of times, many prisoners consider the system which has placed them in prison as unfair, and thus are unwilling to help the system. Attending VET, education or pre-release post-release employment programs supports the system. As one prisoner noted, ‘They have not helped me, so why should I help them’. Another prisoner, talking about this group, said, ‘They think they are 10 foot tall and bullet-proof, been doing crime since they were 8 or 10 years old. You can’t tell them anything. They just don’t want to know’.

VET and education officers who were interviewed had opinions that were very similar to those of the prisoners who were undertaking VET. The correctional system was more focused upon managing and correcting the offending behaviour rather than preparing prisoners for employment upon release. The widely held opinion was that VET was adequately funded, well supported by the department and its senior management, but less supported by the management teams in some centres. Senior management support in the centres was seen to be critical to active and flourishing VET programs in centres.

## Positive prisoner perceptions of VET staff and trainers

Trainers were seen to be supportive of learners, as were other prisoners who were encouraged to assist each other in the training workshops. Across the prisons visited, no prisoner was unhappy with the quality of tuition they had received. In particular, they were treated with respect, not



patronised, and the trainers were perceived to be very creative and accommodating in setting up tasks for learners of different levels of confidence and skill. As various prisoners commented, 'We have not had a bad one yet'; 'He treated us like a human being'; 'The teachers have a lot of industry experiences that they are very happy to share with us'; 'The teacher was really respectful, and called me by my first name'.

VET officers worked closely with the registered training organisations which had successfully tendered to deliver the training required. Trainers completed prison induction programs prior to commencing their training. Once employed within the prison, the evidence from VET and education officers is that trainers will stay involved often for many years in running specific programs in the prisons. As one manager reported:

It is not a good environment for teachers who come in from the outside. It is difficult to get good ones. They have to be very patient, not having keys, access to certain areas, signing in and out of each piece of equipment for security, many restrictions on prisoner movements, and they need a lot of support so that they feel comfortable. Despite all of this, we get some very good teachers.

The centres regularly evaluate the performance of outside trainers, including evaluations by prisoners and VET and education officers. However, the major reason for a change in trainers is that the registered training organisation in a subsequent tender is unsuccessful or does not re-tender for the contract. This happened in the most recent tender round where some long-standing providers of VET in prisons had not re-tendered. The reasons are not publicly known, but it is suggested that the training organisations decided to pursue more financially lucrative contracts with private sector organisations in those industries that have experienced considerable growth with the improved economic conditions.

There was a great deal of evidence that VET staff, education staff and outside trainers were communicating well with each other and working together to assist prisoners. A typical issue was that a prisoner might enrol in a VET program that demanded a higher level of literacy and numeracy (for example, computing), and the VET officer and trainer soon became aware of these learning problems. The prisoner could either access an education program at the same time as the VET program, or seek one-on-one literacy tutoring. VET officers reported that the behaviour of individual prisoners with these learning and comprehension difficulties improved considerably once they were able to keep up with other learners. Correctional officers also reported upon the improved behaviour of such prisoners back in the units.

## Access to training workshops

The establishment of dedicated training workshops by centres was a major facilitator of VET programs. These separate workshops were generally well equipped, and importantly, were not driven by the need to meet production targets and deadlines like the commercial workshops. Like the commercial workshops, however, there were limits on the number of pieces of equipment available for prisoners to use (for example, only a certain number of computers, welding appliances etc.), while prison policies determined the maximum number of prisoners who could be allocated for the safety of prison staff and outside trainers to a workshop or educational area. These policies, in turn, resulted in smaller-size classes than in non-prison training environments, but unfortunately with waiting lists of two to four months for a number of the most popular VET programs in the prisons (that is, first aid, computer studies, forklift operator, landscaping, welding qualifications, Year 10, tertiary preparation).

## Improvements to the training contracts

The new VET contracts introduced in 2004 for the delivery of VET in prisons were set around a minimum class size of six, and classes were well above this target. Most classes contain about

eight to ten participants. Furthermore, the new contracts operate on hours per module. Overall, the correctional staff involved in VET and education believed that these contractual changes had helped to reduce waiting lists and improved the general management of VET in prisons. In some cases, due to a desire to keep working with prisoners, a few teachers had moved across to new providers despite a drop in pay with their new contracts. The reasons they gave included a desire to continue to work with prisoners in teaching relationships they found to be very rewarding.

## Improved employment opportunities from training

Prisoners believed that VET training had improved their self-confidence, raised levels of self-esteem, and in the context of a history of failing to attend and complete their education at school, they were proud to have successfully completed a VET course. Custodial officers, as well as programs staff, mentioned that this improved self-esteem influenced prisoner behaviour for the better back in the units.

Prisoners believed that the VET training would increase the range of jobs they could access upon release. In turn, having a job was critical to their re-integration back into their communities and families. Female prisoners, in particular, talked about the advantages of assisting their children now they knew more about computers, or how the completion of qualifications like small engine or hospitality or kitchen duties would help them to be more confident at home. Asked about the jobs that they would now access, male prisoners who had undertaken VET mentioned most often that they wanted to work as welders, forklift operators, plant operators, construction workers, and in landscaping businesses. The majority of male and female prisoners wanted to be self-employed. They believed that running their own business would allow them to escape the stigma faced by ex-prisoners seeking employment.

As well as gaining useful technical skills, prisoners and staff believed that VET programs built upon their more generic skills. In the training workshops, prisoners had to learn to interact with prisoners they did not know. Prisoners believed that the training sessions improved their general communication and time management skills. They became more aware of the issues involved in working as part of a successful team. They had a better appreciation of the need to continuously improve a product or process, rather than just to make one. The planning required in setting up and working through a task (for example, in computing, engineering design work, landscaping) helped them to improve their project management and decision-making skills. Finally, many Indigenous and non-Indigenous female prisoners said that they felt more self-confident, and were empowered by the new knowledge and skills they had gained through completing various VET modules.

## Factors hindering the provision of VET in prisons

### The need to complete offending behaviour programs

Prisoners identified a wide range of factors they felt hindered their full participation in VET. Many prisoners interviewed believed that the correctional centre system was unsupportive, and often intentionally obstructive to their participation in VET programs. It was perceived by many prisoners that custodial and sentence management staff gave VET and education programs of lower priority than offending behaviour programs and working in the commercial workshops.

Correctional centres conduct a range of offending behaviour programs targeted towards the psychological, cognitive and behavioural factors at the core of an individual's behaviour and which led to their imprisonment. These programs include the cognitive skills programs, drug and alcohol programs and sex offender programs. These offending behaviour programs are either court-ordered, or are determined upon incarceration by interviews between the offender and

psychologists, sentence management staff, and through the use of instruments like the Offender Risk Needs Assessment Inventory (described in more detail in other parts of this report). While offending behaviour programs might be recommended, prisoners can refuse to complete them. It is also widely understood among prisoners that the completion of such programs is viewed positively by those individuals who make key decisions about their progress through the corrections system, including decisions about parole, and reclassification to lower levels of security that result in more freedom of movement and access to facilities while in prison. Indeed, many offenders choose to repeat such programs leading up to decisions by sentence management or parole boards in efforts to prove that they are actively dealing with their offending behaviour.

The next priority among offenders was their attendance at commercial workshops or jobs in prison kitchens, laundries, gardens, and farms. The primary motive for this involvement in the commercial workshops or prison work was to earn money. In some institutions, programs and workshops were organised around different parts of the day. If programs were in the morning (for example, VET), the afternoon was devoted to workshops or other prison work. Minimal disruption to VET programs occurred where the offending behaviour programs were allocated to, for example, the higher-security prisoners in the mornings, so allowing them time to attend training or workshops in the afternoon. Prisoners of various classifications are permitted to mix in the secure custody area. Protection and mainstream prisoners cannot mix either in accommodation areas or on programs. These issues also had to be taken into account in the planning and management of training sessions. However, in some centres less attention was given to reducing potential clashes between attendance at VET programs and involvement in workshops and prison work.

In summary, involvement in VET programs was perceived by offenders to be given a much lower priority by corrections staff than the completion of offending behaviour programs. In addition, many prisoners put the opportunity to earn extra income through prison jobs ahead of spending time in vocational education and training programs.

## The custodial culture versus a training culture

In some centres, there was still the old divide between programs and custodial staff. That is, an old custodial officer culture still existed where, as one officer reminded me, 'Prisons are for corrections, not for education and training'. Another responded, 'I have no idea what VET staff do all day and I don't really care'. VET was working best in meeting the training needs of prisoners where the old divide had long gone between custodial officers and programs staff. Staff worked as teams where information and insights about the personal, educational and training needs of individual prisoners were shared. In these environments, while prisoner and staff safety were still paramount, there was a level of tolerance and flexibility shown by custodial officers that allowed VET and education programs to operate more effectively.

An example was the count at the compulsory musters that occurred during the day. If the prisoner count is not accurate, it is taken again, and if it is still not correct (that is, a prisoner appears to be missing), the prison goes into lock-down. All prisoners return to their cells, and all activities cease. In centres where custodial and programs staff operate as part of a larger team, the muster counts are taken in a way such that a safe and secure environment is maintained, but at the same time, through good communication between custodial and training officers, the musters are sufficiently flexible to ensure that training workshops are not disrupted for long periods of time. In such institutions, flexible and innovative approaches to the timetabling of programs and competing prison work, and good communication between custodial and programs staff have very beneficial effects in promoting access to VET.

A related issue was that VET training should not block access to facilities for other prisoners for long periods of time (for example, computer laboratory, library, gym, painting and pottery rooms). As one officer remarked, 'If we take over the gym, library or art room, prisoners can get

really upset if they cannot access to the facility. It is really a key issue around here especially as many prisoners only get limited time each day to access these facilities’.

## Managing training, education and prison work

Most prisons had modern commercial workshops which employ prisoners. The majority of the VET programs in Queensland operate from the training workshop, while the commercial workshops provided opportunities for prisoners to practise a set of technical and more generic skills, and to undertake paid work. Prison workshops in Queensland correctional centres cover stainless steel, woodwork, paint and powder coating, textile cutting, light fabrication and tailor shop areas. These are in addition to the dedicated training workshop. As noted earlier, getting work in the workshops or related prison jobs (in the laundry, kitchen library, dairies on farms) is the first priority for many prisoners who want to earn as much money as possible while at a centre. It can be argued that these jobs also develop the job skills of prisoners and increase their job-readiness. Such jobs, together with being assistants to correctional staff (for example, activities clerk, library clerk, activities coordinator, assistant to the education officer) were the most sought-after jobs, due to the pay levels and the levels of trust linked to those positions. The attitude among the majority of prisoners, however, was that there were not enough good jobs to go around.

Many of the prisoners undertaking VET programs had potentially busy days with their workshop duties or other prison work as well as VET courses. Low-security prisoners were obligated to complete some type of work in the prison, but at the same time were managing a number of modules across different weeks. For these highly motivated learners, the most difficult challenges were associated with managing the time to attend VET, given competing demands for attending offending behaviour programs, education programs and compulsory workshop duties, if they were low classification prisoners. And this was accomplished in environments where some custodial officers were perceived to give them few concessions which allowed prisoners to more easily manage these demands.

Prisoners report that they rely heavily on prison work or workshops to get extra money to buy sweets and cigarettes (a large number are smokers); money to make telephone calls to family and friends; and the potential to save money for their families or to have savings to assist them upon release. Where prisoners do not work or instead do full-time study at TAFE or university, they receive weekly pay as a form of full-time student remuneration. This group of prisoners also felt that they received the highest levels of criticism from custodial officers, being called ‘lazy bludgers’, as their full-time studies precluded them from regular prison work and work in the commercial workshops.

Prisoners are keen to seek out prison work, and there are waiting lists that sometimes stretch for months to get these preferred jobs. In addition to the work in the kitchens, gardens, and laundry or in various jobs on prison farms, prisoners can be employed in workshops that make sheet metal products and support arc welding, and some prison farms have active dairies. Enrolling in VET courses, however, can threaten access to this work, either through direct clashes in timetabling, or spending insufficient time in the workshop to get their bonus. It means a lot to many prisoners to be able to work in the workshops or in other prison work for up to six days a week to access productivity bonuses. When the work includes a productivity bonus that can be based on attendance and outputs, they can earn at least double the base level of pay.

A number of prisoners who were doing courses that involved developing information technology and administrative skills reported that a lack of access to the internet was hampering their studies. Legislation did not allow access to the internet due to the risks of prisoners accessing inappropriate materials from the World Wide Web, including the sending of emails. Many of these prisoners were young female prisoners who wanted to develop skills that would allow them to do secretarial or administrative work upon release. In these cases, trainers chose other modules

from the training packages that did not require internet access to complete the qualification. A lack of access to the internet, as well as related problems in accessing tutors, emerged as more significant barriers for those who were completing university courses by flexible delivery modes. Prisoners are aware of this at the time of enrolment and are cautioned about the potential problems that lack of access might cause.

## Transfers or release from prison

Another factor that emerged from interviews was the difficulty of ensuring the completion of a training qualification due to the uncertainty of prisoners remaining in the centre providing the training. In many ways, the module-by-module approach being adopted in prisons reflected the reality of being unable to predict prisoner movements. Corrections staff report that the adoption of the module approach was due to wide range of factors, and in particular, prisoner movements, the nature of the training packages, and the fact that the majority of prisoners are serving short sentences (for example, appendix B and the recidivism analyses reported later reveal that 59% of offenders are serving less than one year). It is still fairly commonplace in correctional centres for prisoners to be moved either across correctional centres without much warning, or to be released from prison with little notification, due to the decision of a parole board. Prisoners are moved across centres for a variety of operational reasons, which can include over-crowding, the need to shut units that might have few prisoners, the personal safety of protected prisoners, successful reclassification of the prisoners from high to middle or low/open classifications, and for personal reasons (for example, to locate to a correctional facility closer to their family).

## Current challenges

### Difficulties in accessing skilled external trainers

At present a major challenge across centres is the difficulty among the contracted providers of the training in finding staff who were willing to work at the pay levels set by the providers. With the booming housing and construction industries, the casual trainers who are often allocated this teaching by the registered training organisations have been lured away to higher-paying work in the private sector. Hourly pay rates for welders, large machine operators, and construction workers were two to three times the rates offered by the TAFE or private provider. In some cases, VET courses were organised and run by using non-VET funds to secure the services of private operators who were qualified operators and trainers. In other cases, the VET officer used the VET provider to deliver distance learning to assist prisoners to complete modules that could not be offered due to the cost or the lack of access to a trainer.

### Cancellation of some VET programs

Prisoners complained that they had to join long waiting lists for VET programs, and ultimately some, programs were not run, causing prisoners to be disappointed and often frustrated. Often the delay in the program meant that they were running out of time as their release date was fast approaching. VET staff reported that cancellations were due to the movement or release of prisoners—thus a course was no longer viable due to reduced numbers; equipment was not available; the provider could not access trainers; or changes in correctional program staff, and delays in filling vacancies, resulted in other delays to the training.

## Determining the demand for the annual VET programs

Centres review their VET offerings on an annual basis. About half of the centres had completed training needs analyses of their prison populations in the last one to two years. In addition, new banks of computers had been or were about to be installed in institutions for the computing courses for prisoners. This development was in response to female prisoners' needs to seek employment in secretarial, data entry and related administrative work. Female offenders believed that these skills would help them to assist their children with schoolwork. Computing skills and programs like small engine maintenance gave them something in common with their boyfriends, partners or children. Male prisoners undertook computing courses to help them with their TAFE or university studies, to gain skills seen to be useful in manufacturing and warehousing jobs, and for application to running the small businesses they wanted to establish upon release.

Each year VET officers received a list of programs from the department. They nominate the programs they want to run, the number and the annual total allocation of hours. No VET or education officer was unhappy with the allocation they received for VET courses or the hours for the year. They allocated these hours to a range of training options for prisoners. Guiding these decisions was evidence of continued demand for certain courses as evidenced by:

- ✧ waiting lists
- ✧ retention rates
- ✧ the equipment and workshops available in centres to support the courses (for example, kitchens for hospitality courses; training workshops with the necessary equipment for furnishing, woodworking, welding and metal fabrication; prison farms for horticulture, landscaping, and small engine training)
- ✧ prisoner requests for programs, quite often in response to the types of jobs they had seen advertised in newspapers, or based on anecdotal reports of the types of employment that ex-prisoners had gained. Many prisoners were avid readers of the employment sections of local and national newspapers. As a result, there was currently a very high demand in centres for engineering, construction and welding courses. In a women's centre, courses on fitness, beauty and first aid had been reduced, and replaced with more courses on computing and hospitality.

## Workplace assessment

There were only a few examples of the use of workplace assessment with offenders working in the commercial workshops. A range of security, equipment and financial factors limited the opportunities to complete this assessment in line with Australian Quality Training Framework criteria and included the need to follow prison procedures with regard to the supervision of prisoners in commercial and training workshops and guidelines about the ratio of the number of prisoners to the number of supervisors. Allocating a trainer to a commercial workshop had to be organised well in advance. Two trainers had to be hired and available, one to supervise the larger group of prisoners in the training workshop, and the other to operate as the workplace assessor in the commercial workshop where the equipment and materials were available. In a few situations, a custodial officer who had trade qualifications was available to supervise prisoners in the training workshop. The trainer completed workplace assessments in the adjoining commercial workshop.

## Meeting the special needs of Indigenous prisoners

VET program retention rates were a special challenge for VET officers and trainers with Indigenous prisoners. Except for the programs designed for Indigenous offenders (for example, known in some centres as the Nullooyumbuck program for literacy, and Murrie Art), Indigenous offenders were not allocated to separate classes. Indigenous program officers provided special

support for Indigenous prisoners, while outside tutors were accessed through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander funding. On the other hand, many centres were not able to attract enough Indigenous tutors to meet the needs of their Indigenous prisoners.

Indigenous prisoners were most likely to continue with VET courses where they had access to one-on-one support from trainers and tutors, and where there were two or three other Indigenous prisoners in the class with them. VET officers and the Indigenous officers in the correctional centres believed that it was important to recruit trainers from the registered training organisations who were sensitive to the self-esteem issues of many Indigenous prisoners, their poor literacy and numeracy skills, their low levels of schooling, and the cultural differences between various groups of Indigenous prisoners, as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous prisoners.

Indigenous prisoners ranged from highly urban male and females, who were very comfortable being with non-Indigenous prisoners, to Indigenous offenders from remote regional communities with much less contact with the mainstream society. For example, prisoners from regional and remote communities need to be in training groups with Indigenous prisoners from the same general region to avoid the likelihood of conflict with other Indigenous groups.

The training of Indigenous prisoners also raises concerns about the Indigenous concept of 'the shame job'. Indigenous prisoners with little education felt stupid if they could not do a task. A major reason for some Indigenous male prisoners not taking up offers to do VET training was that they did not want to look stupid or incompetent in front of other prisoners. The provision of outside Indigenous tutors and literacy and numeracy programs before the commencement of VET training programs was designed to reduce some of these concerns among these prisoners.

## Post release and training

### Intentions to continue VET upon release

Prisoners knew that they could access TAFE or private providers upon release to complete or upgrade their qualifications. Many prisoners had completed modules towards a certificate I level, but few had fully completed the qualification. A small minority had completed certificate II qualifications, but this was very much the exception, as noted earlier. As one VET officer noted, 'It has taken us five years to get eight men to a Certificate II in Engineering'.

The vast majority expected that their VET training in prisons would help them get a job upon release. However, only a small number of prisoners who were interviewed reported that they expected to complete the qualification to a certificate I level upon release. The cost of TAFE courses was not a major impediment. Rather they wanted to get a job as soon as possible, and they were concerned that their employers would not be very supportive of further VET training, either at or outside work. Many also said that they had time to make up with family and friends and this would make it difficult to finish any training begun in prison.

### Employment outcomes

While corrections staff were pleased with the employment outcomes being gained by prisoners upon release, they had two major concerns. One was the view that, despite their best efforts, centres were not fully in touch with the types of job opportunities that existed in local or regional communities. A related concern was the difficulty faced by prisoners after release in re-adjusting to the world of work. A solution to many of these concerns will be an expansion of the Post Release Employment Assistance Program described earlier (see Callan 2004) into many Queensland prisons. In addition, the Department of Education and Training has been more active in bringing Centrelink, the Department of Housing and other groups into centres to talk to

prisoners about what is available to them to assist their post-release transition. A continuing concern, however, is the desire of Indigenous prisoners to return to their communities where there are very few job opportunities. Most of them access Community Development Employment Programs which provide unskilled and part-time work. But this work will not provide longer-term solutions to their employment needs.



# Findings from recidivism analyses

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## Overview

The following analyses are based on information provided by the Queensland Department of Corrective Services. The goal of the analyses was to investigate whether characteristics of prison offenders, including their involvement in VET programs, could be used to predict their risk of re-offending (recidivism) after their release from prison. The initial sample of people to be analysed consisted of 6021 individuals who were released from prison in Queensland between 1 July 2001 and 30 November 2002. This group excluded releases to community custody, escapes from custody, and releases on the basis of upheld appeals. A full description of the demographic characteristics of the sample is presented in appendix B. In addition, using this same sample, we also completed analyses to describe the similarities and differences between prisoners who were involved in VET and those who were not involved in VET (see appendix C).

The initial sample of individuals was assessed for evidence of re-offending between the date of their release and the final census date for these analyses, which was 30 November 2004. Evidence of re-offending was drawn from information about returns to custody and/or returns to community supervision during the census period. A 'return to custody' was recorded for those people who returned at least once to a prison sentence during the census period; this definition excluded non-sentenced individuals, people returning from community custody, and those returning from post-prison supervision orders. A 'return to community supervision' was recorded for those people who returned at least once to a community order during the census period; this definition excluded people returning to post prison orders.

For the current analyses, recidivism was defined in two ways. The first, broader definition ('returned to corrective system') included any people from the initial pool of released offenders who returned to custody *or* to community supervision in the census period. This group included 2412 individuals (40.1% of the initial sample). Characteristics of this group are summarised in appendix D). The second, narrower definition ('returned to custody') included only those individuals who returned to custody during the census period. This group included 1810 individuals (30.1% of the initial sample). Characteristics of this group are summarised in appendix E. Subsequent analyses investigating recidivism are reported separately for both of these definitions.

## VET, literacy, numeracy and employment programs

The Queensland Department of Corrective Services provided the data regarding participation in VET and literacy and numeracy programs and the Post Release Employment Assistance Program. Involvement in VET programs was recorded for the period between July 2001 and December 2002. Involvement in literacy/numeracy programs was recorded for the period between January 2001 and December 2002. Of the 6021 people in the initial sample, 1493 (25%) participated in at least one VET program, 985 (16%) participated in at least one literacy or

numeracy program, and 520 (9%) were involved in the Post Release Employment Assistance Program.

The Post Release Employment Assistance Program has run since 2000. It allows offenders six months before release and six months after release to have access to an employment officer who, prior to release, assesses their skills, assists them in preparing a curriculum vitae, and builds rapport with each offender. Upon release, this same individual will take the offender to Centrelink, arrange for access to additional training, and assist them in locating employers and attending job interviews.

Some offenders in the sample did not participate in VET or literacy/numeracy programs before their initial release. That is, some people in the sample were released, then re-offended, were returned to custody, and then participated in these programs. In the full sample, 1311 (22%) participated in at least one VET program before their initial release, and 835 (14%) participated in at least one literacy or numeracy program before their initial release in the census period.

Since the goal of this report was (in part) to determine whether involvement in these programs had any influence on the overall propensity to re-offend, such involvement could not be included when it occurred after those being studied had already re-offended. This correction to the data is made for all logistic regressions reported below. All other analyses relating to VET/literacy/numeracy programs report the original (uncorrected) data.

Finally, note that the data analysed in this report relate to participation in VET/literacy and numeracy programs. Data for completion of these programs were not available. It is assumed that any effects on recidivism of program participation are liable to be smaller than the effects of program completion, were these data to be analysed in the same way.

## VET program participation

The characteristics of those who participated in any VET programs were compared with those who did not. Cross-tabulations (see appendices C and D) indicate that VET program participants, relative to non-participants, are:

- ✧ no less likely to return to custody, but less likely to return to community supervision and less likely to return to the corrective system overall
- ✧ more likely to be female
- ✧ less likely to be Aboriginal or Islander
- ✧ more likely to have committed offences involving robbery and extortion, and less likely to have committed offences against good order
- ✧ more likely to have sentences ranging from one year to ten years, and less likely to have shorter or longer sentences
- ✧ more likely to have higher levels of education
- ✧ more likely to be involved in the Post Release Employment Assistance Program and literacy/numeracy programs
- ✧ younger on average.

Note that these conclusions are based on statistical tests which do not correct for other demographic characteristics of the sample.

## Offender Risk Needs Inventory

Data drawn from the Offender Risk Needs Inventory were available for some of the individuals in the initial sample. The inventory provides two different measures used in this study. The first is the total score. This is a single score with a possible range of 0 to 41, which represents an index of the risk of recidivism based on the presence of multiple specific risk factors assessed in an interview setting. Higher scores correspond to a higher risk of re-offending. The second measure is by risk category. This variable can take a value of low, medium, high or extreme, and is initially based on a categorisation of the inventory total score described above. However, there is provision for the interviewer to override the original risk category indicated by the inventory total score, and to increase or decrease the risk category (usually only to the next lower or higher category). The decision to override the risk category is based on additional information available to the interviewer, which does not form part of the risk factors used to produce the inventory total score.

Since the Offender Risk Needs Inventory total score and the risk category provide slightly different information, both these measures are used in the prediction of recidivism reported below. Since these measures were only available for about one-third of the initial sample (due to the relatively recent introduction of the inventory), analyses involving the inventory measures have a dramatically reduced sample size relative to the initial sample. Therefore, the recidivism analyses below are reported both with and without the inventory variables.

## Recidivism analysis

Details about the statistical nature of these logistic regression analyses, including the various model fits, are reported in the supporting document (see appendix F).

## Summary of individual predictors

### Predicting return to the corrective system—the first measure of recidivism

The following section summarises the findings for individual variables when used to predict return to the corrective system. For each variable, the findings regarding significance are statistically controlled for the effect of other variables in the sample—results indicate the unique contribution of each variable after correcting for the effects of all other variables.

- ✧ *Age* is a significant predictor, with older people being less likely to return to the corrective system. Overall, those who returned to the corrective system were on average five years younger than those who did not return.
- ✧ *Sex* is not a significant predictor.
- ✧ *Indigenous status* is a significant predictor, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being more likely to return to the corrective system. Overall, our analyses showed that 34% of non-Indigenous offenders returned to the corrective system, while 55% of Indigenous offenders returned.
- ✧ *Post Release Employment Assistance Program* is not a significant predictor.
- ✧ *Most serious offence grouping* is a significant predictor. People convicted of property offences, motor vehicle and traffic offences, or offences against good order appear more likely to return to the corrective system. People convicted of robbery/extortion offences or drug offences appear less likely to return to the corrective system.

- ✧ *Sentence length grouping* is a significant predictor. People with shorter initial sentences are more likely to return to the corrective system than people with longer initial sentences.
- ✧ *Education grouping* is a significant predictor. In general, people with higher levels of education (especially Year 12 or above) are less likely to return to the corrective system than people with lower levels of education. However, very low levels of education (that is, up to Year 7 only) are not associated with higher risk of return to the corrective system.
- ✧ *Total Offender Risk Needs Inventory score* is a significant predictor, with people who score higher being more likely to return to the corrective system. Overall, those who returned scored 3.3 points higher on the inventory than those who did not return.
- ✧ *Risk category* is a significant predictor, with people categorised as ‘high risk’ being much more likely to return to the corrective system than those categorised as ‘low risk’.
- ✧ *VET before initial release* is a significant predictor, with people involved in VET being less likely to return to the corrective system. Overall, 42% of those who did not participate in VET before their initial release returned to the corrective system (that is, the first, broader measure of recidivism), while only 32% of VET participants returned. This difference represents an overall drop of 24% in the rate of recidivism associated with involvement in VET programs.

## Predicting return to custody—the second measure of recidivism

The following section summarises the findings for individual variables when used to predict return to custody. As above, for each variable, the findings regarding significance are statistically controlled for the effect of other variables in the sample.

- ✧ *Age* is a significant predictor, with older people being less likely to return to custody. On average, people who returned to the corrective system were five years younger than those who did not return.
- ✧ *Sex* is a significant predictor, with females being less likely to return to custody. Overall, 31% of males returned to custody, but only 26% of females returned.
- ✧ *Indigenous status* is a significant predictor, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being more likely to return to custody. Overall, 25% of non-Indigenous offenders returned to custody, while 43% of Indigenous offenders returned.
- ✧ *Post Release Employment Assistance Program* is not a significant predictor, although there is some slight indication that involvement in the program is associated with lower incidence of return to custody.
- ✧ *Most serious offence grouping* is a significant predictor. People convicted of property offences or offences against good order appear more likely to return to custody. People convicted of robbery/extortion offences or drug offences appear less likely to return to custody.
- ✧ *Sentence length grouping* is a significant predictor. People with shorter initial sentences are more likely to return to custody than people with longer initial sentences.
- ✧ *Education grouping* is a significant predictor. In general, people with higher levels of education (especially Year 12 or above) are less likely to return to custody than people with lower levels of education. However, very low levels of education (that is, up to Year 7 only) are not associated with higher risk of return to custody.
- ✧ *Total Offender Risk Needs Inventory score* is a significant predictor, with people who score higher being more likely to return to custody. Overall, those who returned scored 3.5 points higher on the inventory than those who did not return.
- ✧ *Risk category* is a significant predictor, with people categorised as ‘high risk’ being much more likely to return to custody than those categorised as ‘low risk’.

- ✧ *VET before initial release* is a significant predictor, with people involved in VET being less likely to return to custody. Overall, 32% of those who did not participate in VET before their initial release returned to custody (that is, the second, narrower measure of recidivism), while only 23% of VET participants returned. This difference represents an overall drop of 28% in the rate of recidivism associated with involvement in VET programs.
- ✧ *Literacy/ numeracy before initial release* is not a significant predictor, although there is some slight indication that participation in literacy/ numeracy programs is associated with lower incidence of return to custody.

## Summary of findings

Overall, these analyses indicate that a combination of predictors is able to predict recidivism successfully. More specifically, recidivism is more likely to occur in people who have shorter initial sentences, are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and were convicted of property offences and offences against good order. Recidivism is less likely to occur in people who are older, have higher levels of education (especially Year 12 or beyond), were convicted of robbery/extortion or drug offences, and who participated in VET programs before their initial release in the census period. It should be noted that the modest levels of explained variance in these analyses indicate that there are many other factors, not measured in the present study, which may also contribute to the incidence of recidivism.

# Concluding comments

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## Operating within two systems

The correctional services system in Australia, according to the Australian Government Productivity Commission review into government services (2004), is focused upon achieving five objectives. These objectives are *custody*, that is, to protect the community by sound management of prisoners commensurate with the risk they pose to the community, but at the same time to allow prisoners acceptable quality of life consistent with community norms; *community*, to protect the community by the sound management of offenders, but also by giving prisoners access to referral to social support agencies; *reparation*, to ensure that work undertaken by prisoners benefits the community directly or indirectly by reducing cost to the taxpayer; *prisoners/offender programs*, which address the causes of offending to maximise the chances of successful re-integration into the community and reduce the risk of re-offending; and *advice to sentencing and releasing authorities*, to assist in the disposition of prisoners, release to parole, and the necessary conditions for their supervision and post-release supervision. The challenge that emerges for the correctional system, and prisoners and correctional staff is that the balance of these objectives currently is predominantly around the goals of custody, community and advice to sentencing and releasing authorities, and less so to reparation and offender programs.

On the other hand, the implementation of vocational education and training in corrections is targeted more at the two objectives of reparation and prisoner/offender programs. The focus is upon crime prevention rather than containment. The guiding philosophy supported by research is that successful offender management involves attending to the complexity of circumstances and needs of prisoners. Prisoners who have appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy, and who are job-ready upon release, are more likely to gain employment, which in turn reduces their chances of re-offending and being sent back to prison. However, while this message is being accepted and responded to by policy leaders in the corrections area, it is yet to reach those who operate correctional facilities, especially some prison managers, sentence management staff and custodial officers.

Across Australia, the Productivity Commission and other reports reveal that there is growing evidence that our correctional systems are beginning to build a 'throughcare' philosophy in which an integrated program of rehabilitation, education and training is emerging and which is designed to meet the special and complex needs of prisoners both before release and after release. We found that custodial staff involved in prison programs and prisoners were both extremely positive about any developments that support the apparent evolution of a more integrated system of offender management. The more obvious developments they were currently witnessing in this Queensland study included the provision of pre-release/transition and employment programs, the opportunity to be involved in meaningful prison work, the expansion of vocational training into new areas, including certificate III qualifications, and more access to advice about health services, education, training and housing prior to release. Prisoners were supportive of any actions which will help them to overcome the clashes they experience almost daily in managing the expectations of the correctional system and expectations of the education and training system

operating within their custodial facilities. Significantly, vocational education and programs officers in correctional centres were keen to examine new developments designed to create a more integrated approach to offender management.

In this research, we found highly motivated offenders engaging in and completing multiple VET programs which were providing them with technical skills, but which also improved confidence, self-esteem, and broader sets of generic skills. They were very positive about the role that prison staff and trainers were playing in assisting them to develop skills to help them to re-integrate back into the community upon release. The availability and access to dedicated training workshops in correctional centres as well as to outside trainers (and in some cases, tutors) who were highly professional and respectful of prisoner needs, and their often disadvantaged backgrounds, were further supports for the continued emergence of a throughcare approach to prisoner management.

The significant evidence to emerge from our analyses explaining the importance of pursuing a more integrated program which develops employment skills is that offenders involved in VET were less likely to return to the corrective system. On average, being involved in VET before initial release was associated with a decrease in the chance of returning. These findings are very significant, and approximate the findings of the three-states recidivism study (Steurer et al. 2001), regarded as the most comprehensive and scientific study made on correctional education and training to date.

Another significant finding is the benefit of applying systems that focus upon the risks of re-offending, and which in turn, can be used to better target prisoner needs. The use of a risk assessment upon initial incarceration permits the classification of prisoners into risk categories, such that offending behaviour and vocational education and training programs are most appropriately assigned to offenders. The quantitative analyses have demonstrated this most strongly, in that prisoners scoring higher in risk were more likely to return to the corrective system. Overall, higher total scores on the Offender Risk Needs Inventory scale are associated with and increased risk of returning. Individuals categorised as 'high risk' were much more likely to return to the corrective system or to custody than those categorised as 'low risk'. Given this evidence, it is important that sentence management in correctional centres continues to apply a different mix of offending behaviour and education and training programs related to the specific needs of prisoners who present different risk profiles.

In the context of the shortcomings that currently exist, it is clear that prisoners in this Queensland study, and as evidenced in reports cited from other jurisdictions, are faced with managing the demands and constraints of two systems that have similar, but also different objectives: the corrective services system, and the system of vocational education and training. Prisoners are attempting to meet their educational and training needs within corrective systems that are still geared primarily, and understandably, to the safe and humane management of offenders while in correctional facilities. Fewer people and financial resources are focused upon the transition management of prisoners on release back into the community. As described in this report, this clash of systems means that prisoners and their education and training officers confront a wide range of issues that make the delivery of training, at worst, piecemeal and uncoordinated. These challenges include:

- ✧ the perceived lower importance given by correctional authorities to the value of VET training by comparison with the completion of offending behaviour programs that deal with offender behaviour (for example, drug and alcohol programs; anger management programs; sex offender programs)
- ✧ the continued operation of a predominantly correctional prison culture concerned with running a prison to retain prisoners rather than running a prison that also provides services that rehabilitate

- ✧ the current difficulties in many centres of accessing skilled trainers, the problems associated with managing waiting lists, the movements of prisoners across centres, and the lack of success in introducing workplace assessment in the prison workshops and on the prison farms.

## The special needs of Indigenous prisoners

Our analyses reveal, as others have found, that Aboriginal and Torres Islander people are more likely to return to the corrective system or to custody in a Queensland correctional facility. As other studies reviewed in this report also observe, Indigenous prisoners are most likely to be at the worst end of the education and skills profile. Upon release they have greater difficulty finding suitable accommodation and employment, and are less likely to have good work prospects, irrespective of their in-prison activities.

In terms of a set of responses that adopt a throughcare philosophy, the correctional systems are moving towards addressing more successfully the diversity and complexity of prisoner circumstances and needs. As outlined by the Productivity Commission (2004) review of government services, the development and management of appropriate, effective, responsive and coordinated service programs continue to be a major policy focus for corrective services. In the interviews, we found that Indigenous offenders were being successfully integrated into vocational education and training programs with non-Indigenous offenders through the care and attention of dedicated and thoughtful programs staff and trainers. Also, program and vocational education officers were cooperating closely in their efforts to respond to the diversity of needs often presented by Indigenous offenders, in that offenders were often being managed for drug and alcohol problems, while at the same time trying to focus upon developing new skills to make them more job-ready upon release.

Training coordinators in correctional facilities were successfully accessing special funding which allowed for some offending behaviour and vocational education and training programs specifically for Indigenous offenders. These same sources of funding also enabled access to special tutoring for Indigenous offenders who were undertaking high school preparation courses or university qualifications by distance. Registered training organisations which, in recent times, had been awarded contracts to deliver the pre-release, post-release employment program were selected, among numerous other criteria, on the basis of proven expertise and track record in assisting Indigenous people to find employment. These registered training organisations in their new contracts also had to employ Indigenous caseworkers to visit prisoners prior to release. In addition, Aboriginal elders were playing a supportive and consultative role in some centres, especially shaping new initiatives that might better meet the cultural, education and adjustment needs of Indigenous offenders. All of these actions highlight the increased focus of the Queensland correctional centres upon managing the complex and diverse needs of their prison populations.

## Implications

The literature review and qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (logistic regressions) analysis reveal strong evidence for the positive impact upon prisoners, and ultimately upon the rates of recidivism, of the provision of vocational education and training programs in correctional institutions. A number of implications, which suggest future areas for action, emerge from the findings of this report. These include:

- ✧ It is important to continue to identify and resolve the operational and philosophical barriers that exist in correctional facilities which are negatively influencing the provision of VET. In particular, correctional institutions need to be funded by their responsible agencies and



departments on evidence that they are achieving performance indicators focused upon not only achieving the objectives of custody and advice to sentencing and releasing authorities, but also on their achievements in rehabilitation and prisoner adjustment and employment upon release. The achievement of throughcare will require patience, time and planning, as well as continued cultural and structural change, including the introduction of better systems and evaluation mechanisms.

- ✧ Examining ways to achieve a more comprehensive integration of the existing elements that operate in correctional centres should become the basis of more integrated prisoner management systems. These elements include the links between offender induction programs; the application of a prisoner risk management classification that is linked to the identification of programs which deal with offender behaviours and prisoners' educational and training needs; the integration and coordination of these offending behaviour and training programs around prison work; and links between these programs and the transition of prisoners into pre-release employment programs near the end of their sentences.
- ✧ While involvement in VET is linked to reduced levels of recidivism, only about one in five offenders are accessing VET programs while in prison. In addition, due to their shorter sentences, many others are ineligible for participation in VET programs. However, people with shorter initial sentences appear to be more likely to return to the corrective system than people with longer initial sentences. Given the evidence from interviews and the statistical analyses about the positive impacts of VET programs upon offenders, a key issue for further debate is the value in expanding offenders' levels of access to VET. If this is to occur for prisoners with shorter sentences, the related challenge is how to deliver VET in a meaningful way to this group of offenders during their shorter periods of incarceration.
- ✧ Those features of VET which have been successfully integrated into most workplace environments should be investigated to enable them to be more successfully introduced into correctional institutions than is currently the case. In particular, these elements include the application of prior learning/recognition of current competency, the introduction of workplace assessment into prison workshops, and the training of suitably qualified custodial or program officers as workplace assessors.
- ✧ Developing links between correctional institutions and employer groups would enable employment opportunities to be identified for prisoners well before release. This would encourage correctional centres to provide VET courses for prisoners in areas of identified employment need in local communities, thereby enhancing the likely employment of offenders upon release.

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# Support document details

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *Vocational education and training and recidivism in Queensland correctional institutions: Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVET's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>. This document contains:

- ✧ Appendix A: Interview questions with offenders and correctional staff
- ✧ Appendix B: Interview questions with offenders and correctional staff
- ✧ Appendix C: Characteristics of VET and non-VET participants
- ✧ Appendix D: Characteristics of recidivists (return to the corrective system)
- ✧ Appendix E: Characteristics of recidivists (return to custody)
- ✧ Appendix F: Results of logistic regression models

This report examines links between prisoners' participation in the vocational education and training (VET) programs available within the Queensland prison system and their chances of returning to prison. The findings reveal that being involved in VET before initial release decreases the chances of returning to prison from 32% to 23%. Nevertheless, particular attention needs to be given to designing a comprehensive range of programs targeted at meeting the needs of individual prisoner groups, particularly for Indigenous prisoners. The research supports efforts to promote the value of VET and its role in prisoner rehabilitation, and to reduce barriers to accessing VET in correctional centres.

NCVER is an independent body responsible for collecting, managing, analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training.

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