

**Workshop 24:**  
**Aligning educational needs with institutional priorities:  
Facilitating offender reintegration into contemporary society**

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### **Abstract**

Increasingly in higher education circles, the focus is on learner-centred education, encouraging learners to become independent in their learning habits to meet the lifelong learning requirements of employers and of other community groups. To accomplish this, students need to develop skills in a range of literacies including information technology, accessing and assessing information, time and self-management of the learning process, and becoming more aware of their own learning styles and preferences.

Access to technology remains a central issue with some groups of students, including those incarcerated in correctional settings. This raises significant challenges both for corrective services agencies and for education providers to align educational needs of offenders with contemporary community expectations without compromising institutional priorities with regard to issues such as security and behaviour management.

This paper will report on a CD prototype development by USQ, which represents current directions in the provision and delivery of education courses. The design is intended to accommodate different learning styles, adult learning principles, and to develop lifelong learning skills consistent with contemporary society.

Such new technological developments in the delivery of distance education highlight the need for ongoing dialogue between education providers, corrective services personnel, and the broader community.

### **Context**

Through the 1980's and 1990's substantial reform reshaped both the physical and affective environments in which offenders were held in custody. A progressive move from retribution towards a rehabilitative philosophy now underpins most modern day correctional practices both nationally and internationally. See, for example, [http://www.easternlincs.org/correctional\\_education/facts\\_statistics.html](http://www.easternlincs.org/correctional_education/facts_statistics.html), also <http://www.sado.org/21cdn1.htm>. In the latter reference, from the Michigan State Appellate Defender Office, it is claimed that prison-based education programs are the most effective of all programs targeted at reducing recidivism. This has been the hallmark

of this period, albeit often in a two-steps forward and one-step back fashion. Nevertheless, correctional systems now provide much more opportunity for reform of offending behaviour through effective sentence management and a range of educational provisions. Australian society has generally been supportive of the reforms to corrective services systems. Recognition that many offenders will eventually be returned to the community has emphasised the importance of facilitating their reintegration into contemporary society. One of the significant challenges has been the ability of rehabilitative systems to keep pace with the rapid and dynamic pace of change within society. To function effectively upon release, offenders need a range of modern day literacies, a significant proportion of these being linked to expertise with information technology. Herein lies one of the emerging challenges both for corrective services personnel, and for education providers, as many fraud offences have been linked to expanding computer literacy (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002, p. 23)

Most of us would acknowledge that it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the impact of new technologies on our everyday life, when we need to make financial transactions, seek information, or use home entertainment products. Implicit in this scenario is the need for us as consumers to be up to date with those technologies, whether in our workplace or at home, or in other locations. For offenders in custody the ability to access employment upon release and to function effectively in the community requires the development of life-long learning skills, these days increasingly dependent upon the skills to access and assess information. To meet these contemporary needs new approaches to the design and delivery of education services are essential.

For universities and other education providers, the need to provide relevance in education courses flows through not only to the tools we use to seek information to create and deliver courses, but also to how we communicate with our students, how they enroll, and how we provide them with support. Increasingly, these operations are computer-based, in part to maximize learning and teaching opportunities by offering different pathways to suit different learning styles, but also to keep pace with the changing needs of employers or professional bodies.

Student diversity is also an important consideration in meeting the challenges of designing and delivering education programs. Now that higher education is no longer the sole domain of the rich and powerful, teaching and learning must be presented in a broader real world context in which a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds are catered for. Clearly the majority of incarcerated offenders come from disadvantaged social backgrounds often with low educational attainment levels. ( James 2002, p.2) observes that *'...Australians with low educational levels are vulnerable and at risk of being marginalized in a knowledge-based society in which labour markets require sophisticated skills and the capacity to access and interpret new knowledge...'*. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and based on the 2001 Census of Population and Housing, 'People of all ages use computers and the Internet for activities such as recreation, work, study, communication and making financial transactions' (<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats> ). Access is still a significant issue, however, particularly for those in some rural or remote locations, and in lower socio-economic groups, for example.

Bynner & Egerton (2000) have reviewed the research on the social benefits of higher education. They argue that beyond the obvious economic advantages to the community as a whole, less easily observable benefits such as increased social cohesion are valuable

outcomes in terms of their impact on the macro economy, reducing costs associated with Social Security and the Criminal Justice systems.

They further argue that their data analysis confirms that graduates are more likely than non-graduates to reap the social benefits of:

- occupational attainment
- skills improvement
- health and self-esteem
- family and parenting
- active citizenship and
- positive and constructive attitudes and values.

### **Attributes for a contemporary society**

In recent years, universities nationally and internationally have published lists of graduate attributes, or generic skills which students are expected to develop or refine through their higher education studies. The list below for the University of Southern Queensland students is fairly typical of the expectations of graduates:

- Competence and emerging expertise in their chosen discipline(s)
- Analytical and critical thinking skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Independent learning skills
- Communication skills
- Information technology literacy appropriate to their discipline(s)
- Numeracy appropriate to their discipline(s)
- Information acquisition, organization and presentation skills
- Decision-making skills based on open-mindedness, objectivity and reasoned analysis
- An awareness of the need for, and an understanding of, high professional standards and ethical behaviour
- An awareness of the need for, and an understanding of, individual responsibility and accountability
- An awareness that learning must be lifelong in an ever-changing society
- An understanding of the social, environmental and cultural context of their discipline(s).

( <http://www.usq.edu.au/vc/planstats/PS/graduateattributes.htm> ) For further examples, see also <http://cea.curtin.edu.au/ATN/> , and <http://www.education.uts.edu.au/fstudents/courseinfo/attributes.html> .

The Commonwealth *Striving for Quality* document (DEST 2002) flags a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogy, with increased expectation that students will be actively engaged in learning, taking responsibility for planning and managing their time, seeking and assessing information, as well as communicating with other learners and teachers. This is not a new approach, but coupled with increased use of computer-based delivery, information dissemination, communication, enrolment and support services for education, it highlights the challenges both for education providers, and for particular groups of students.

To achieve desirable graduate attributes, education courses need to be cognizant of the theory supporting the success of adult learners. While there is no one set of descriptors for adult learners, some considerations, as outlined by (Kasworm, Polson & Fishback 2002) are:

- adult learners have significant life experience
- they may have clearer career/life goals than younger students
- they are more likely to be studying part-time, and combining full-time work with study
- they may have major family responsibilities
- they may be first-generation university students
- they have a different resource-base for financing their education
- they may represent a greater proportion of lower-income numbers and/or disability categories

Academically, adult students gain similar if not higher grade point averages compared with younger students. They may enter with more uneven academic preparation than school-leavers, but this may be offset by life-experience skills.

### **Provision of distance education in correctional institutions**

For obvious reasons the corrections environment has largely been reliant upon the provision of external studies/distance education for offenders who seek tertiary studies. Traditionally, some preparatory, undergraduate and postgraduate programs have been accessible to prisoners by means of print based packages, sometimes supplemented with audio or videotapes and supported by institutional support systems with the assistance of correctional centre education staff.

Over the last 30 years the provision of education by distance has evolved and expanded due in part to the availability of an ever-widening range of technologies with the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Initially, distance learning was based entirely upon the correspondence model. This was quickly enhanced by multimedia in which print materials were supported by audio and videotapes and early computer based learning (e.g. Computer Managed Learning, Computer Assisted Learning). Further development in the delivery of studies occurred with audio and videoconferencing and an assortment of audiographic communications. In more recent years these delivery technologies have embraced more flexible modes of learning with greater use of interactive multimedia and sophisticated computer mediated communication (Taylor 1995, 2001). While all of these technological developments have been enhancements to a print based model, it is not difficult to imagine a future where print based learning materials are replaced entirely by technology mediated flexible learning. Currently, many universities are applying what Taylor (2001) describes as a 'fifth-generation model of distance education', which includes interactive multimedia online; internet-based access to WWW resources; computer mediated communication with automated response systems; and campus portal access to institutional processes and resources. (Taylor 2001, p. 3)

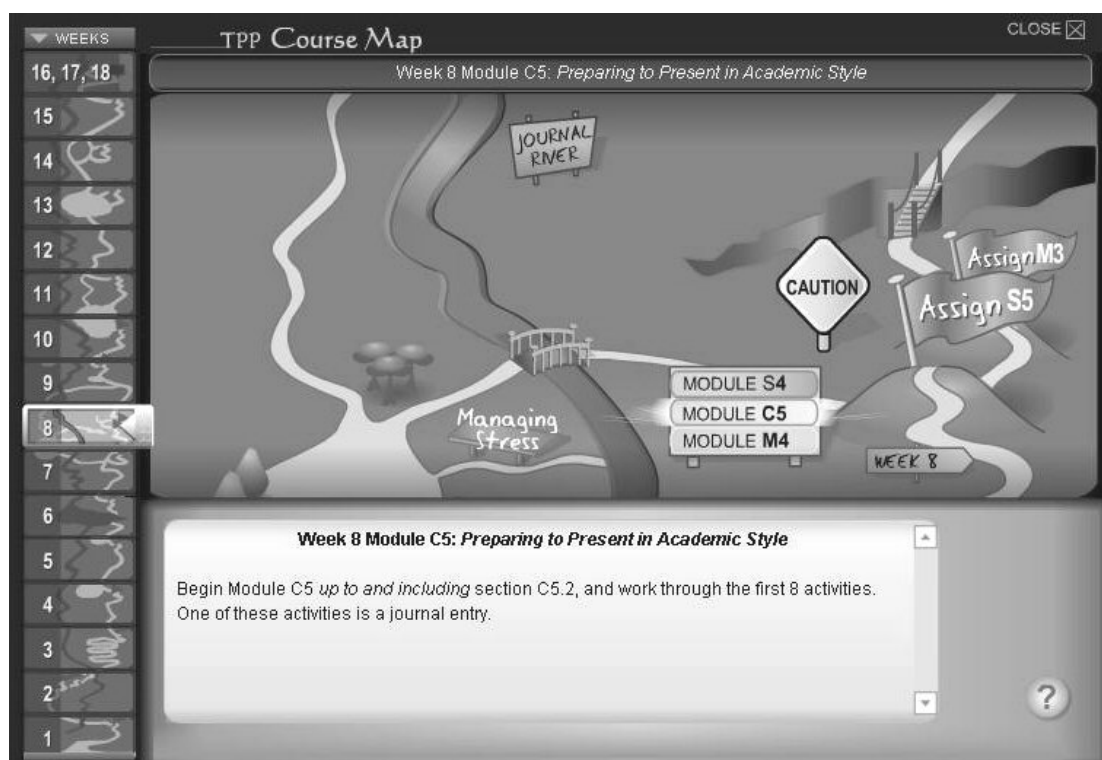
To illustrate the importance of distance education in the provision of tertiary studies to offenders in custody, one only needs to examine the extent of this service provided to the Queensland Corrective Services Commission by the University of Southern Queensland. In 2003, USQ has 138 prisoners enrolled across 26 separate correctional institutions (primarily Queensland). Of these students, 85 are enrolled in preparatory programs (TPP), 50 in undergraduate courses and 3 in postgraduate courses. Of the 50 undergraduate students, 14 are enrolled in Business, 11 in Information Technology, 10 in Arts, 8 in Engineering and 7 in Psychology. All are studying by distance education.

Distance education provision in correctional centres has, until recently, been largely able to keep pace with technological delivery, primarily because the emphasis has remained on print materials and issues of security, fundamental to effective corrections, has imposed limits on access to other technologies for offenders in custody. However, the major challenge for future distance education provision in correctional centres is still to emerge and will require a reconsideration of security and other management issues in terms of access to technology and in particular computer mediated interactive environments while maintaining adequate and appropriate security.

### TPP prototype CD-ROM

Within the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) at USQ, courses must be designed to accommodate not only diverse student backgrounds and past learning experiences, but also, to balance the need for supported learning against the need to develop increasingly sophisticated skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To this end, a trial CD-ROM using a graphics-based navigation approach has been developed to gather student responses to a computer-based study environment. In designing the CD-ROM, care has been taken to consider adult learning principles, learning styles and student motivation, as well as the complexity of the course material.

The CD builds on the theme of learning as a journey, and provides students with an interactive navigation map to work their way through the course. There are links to prompts and explanations of the course elements, and to assessment-related tasks. As part of further development, course content is being added to the CD, and students with online access may also participate in online discussions with their teachers or fellow students, thus offering students the chance to practice computer skills, to choose pathways which best suit their learning needs, and to apply a visual (rather than text-based) approach to certain learning elements.



The delivery of the USQ Tertiary Preparation Program on CD will commence in semester 1, 2004. At this stage, this is the preferred mode of a wider hybrid delivery model under consideration. Hybrid delivery provides course content in the form of a resource based learning package which is then supplemented by interactive teaching support activities which harness communications technologies appropriate for a particular context (e.g. correctional institutions). The core content of the CD resource based package remains the same for all students but the use of extended features within this environment becomes much more powerful when used in conjunction with university online systems. Such systems incorporate online discussion forums and platforms such as WebCT Vista, which will enable university staff to release additional content and resources as required throughout the course and to post notices to the entire student cohort or to individuals. The means and availability of access to the extended features of these resource packages for incarcerated students will be a matter of policy for the Commission to determine and will likely have a considerable impact upon correctional centre education staff and resources. Without due consideration for the future directions of distance education provision, groups such as offenders in custody will be further marginalised if the issues of appropriate access, use and support of their studies are excessively constrained by wider concerns of institutional security.

At first glance such issues appear difficult to resolve. Clearly conflict exists between society's expectations of a secure correctional environment and the means to achieve a rehabilitative education of offenders, which aligns to the requirements of the social environment into which they will be released (DCS Strategic Plan 2003-2007). These challenges can best be addressed by the close and continued cooperation of all the major stakeholders. The community must face the reality of a technologically literate society and be prepared to accept that prior to release offenders should have acquired at least some of these skills. Education providers must search for flexibility in the design and delivery of courses to meet the unique requirements of incarcerated contexts. Corrective services rehabilitative systems need to boldly address the issues of a society hinged upon technological literacy and the need to develop life-long learning skills in offenders prior to their release. Offenders in custody must be prepared to address their behaviours and recognise the path to a secure future is through a personal mastery of the skills necessary to survive and prosper in contemporary society.

### **Challenges and issues**

Change in the social and technological environment and the provision of appropriate education to meet contemporary community needs, must be addressed dynamically. It is necessary to confront the issues and pilot a range of solutions to achieve a position that aligns with the institutional priorities of higher education institutions, correctional centres and the expectations of the community. Some compromises will be necessary and many solutions may be governed by resource availability.

Perhaps the most challenging issue is the move in higher education towards online interaction as a means to enhance the learning environment. Recent research has also highlighted the value of online discussions to develop teamwork, practise communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving, as well as awareness of peer performance. (See, for example, Oliver 2000; Daniel & Cox 2003.) Future delivery of higher education courses may be seriously compromised without the use of interactive facilities. With the assistance of education officers in correctional centres and technical staff from corrective services it may be possible to experiment with 'lock out' features, which enable some

online access but limit this to direct links to essential resources. In effect, the development and exploration of an Intranet specifically for educational provision.

Another possibility is an evolution of the roles of education staff in centres so that they act as clearinghouses for online education resources, in which they relay course-related information to students. These hypothetical solutions however, are highly dependent upon the resource capacity of corrective services to provide appropriate supervision, relevant interaction and adequate access to information technology for offenders. Similarly, university policy-making on provision and support of education services must continue to acknowledge the diverse needs and locations of our various students, with consequent implications for learning outcomes.

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