

Workshop 1:
**Showcase correctional education innovation
in Western Australia**

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The work of the correctional educator is rarely straightforward. It continues to be a matter of adapting, amending, cajoling and constantly attempting to bring disparate groups towards some degree of shared understanding. This situation appears to have been the case since the inception of correctional education and, I surmise, will probably exist in various degrees for a long time yet. Add to this the cyclical nature of all institutional life with all its inherent highs and lows and one begins to comprehend that correctional education, for all its faults, does offer the adventurous, enormous professional challenges. Life is never dull!

Until the end of the “nineties”, WA prison education and vocational training was just tolerated and certainly kept to one side as one of the “do –gooding” activities that Superintendents were forced to accommodate. Since 1997, the Education and Vocational Training Unit (EVTU) has enjoyed relatively prosperous times with keen interest and proactive support coming from the very “top”. This support has translated into a number of correctional education innovations that bring us a little closer to achieving our aspiration of the provision of the complete educational service.

Reducing re-offending

A visit to Europe in 2002, to examine practices aimed at reducing recidivism brought a ministerial party in touch with the “Social Exclusion Factors” identified by the Home Office (2002). A lack of education was seen as a very significant causal factor in the offending cycle and so it became one of the 12 actions that formed the basis of the “Reducing Re-offending” report compiled after the Minister’s return (McGinty, 2002). Reducing recidivism also became an important across-government initiative with a very clear message to all that Justice wasn’t the only department to have responsibilities in this area. This upsurge in interest was just the catalyst the EVTU needed to formalise many of its exploratory forays into strategies to assist prisoners with pathways into community education, training and employment. One lesson the successful correctional educator has learned well in dealings with prisons is that “when given an inch you must take a mile”. The strategy identified as necessary to oversee the implementation of the 12 Actions of the Reducing

Re-Offending report became known as the Re-entry Project and is influential in underpinning all recent activity of the DoJ.

Briefly, the report advocated the following 12 actions:

1. An effective re-entry program for prisoners through the provision of support services and increased drug treatment options in the community.
2. Improve the quality and purpose of education & training in prisons in order to facilitate greater employment opportunities for prisoners, post release through:
 - Delivering skills more relevant to gaining and retaining employment on release from prison
 - Increasing literacy and numeracy skills whilst in prison
 - Providing seamless and supported transition from prison to community mainstream educational settings or employment.
3. Establishing effective partnerships with government and non- government agencies in relation to health, housing, training, welfare and employment to provide community-focused services which support re-entry.
4. Establish a taskforce to consider the management of people with mental illness in the Criminal Justice System.
5. Develop and implement an arrest/referral process for drug offenders at first point of contact.
6. Explore the merits of establishing a Justice Mediation Service as part of the prosecution process – victim focused.
7. Intensive monitoring of serious drug offenders re-entering the community using the Judiciary and/or the Parole Board to ensure effective management.
8. Provide program and counselling support for drug users re-entering the community for up to two years after release.
9. Review the use of pharmacotherapies for drug offender treatment programs
10. Increased emphasis on family relationships through “family friendly” prison environments, more flexible Home Leave and Leave of Absence provisions.
11. Review of the Drug Court
12. Review statistical information and performance measurement as a means of understanding the social and contextual issues associated with re-offending.

Both actions 1 and 2 from the Report were of value to the EVTU because they added greater weight to the directions we wished to pursue. The Linking Offenders To Services Committee (LOTS) comprised a group of representatives from Dept of Training, Centrelink, Outcare, Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) and the DoJ. This committee, formed a few months prior to the Minister’s visit to Europe acquired a legitimacy and hence, gained in stature after the Reduced Re-offending report was published. Barriers to successful transition from prison to the community were, and are still, identified as they arise and all groups working together have brought about a number of significant outcomes that individually would have been difficult to achieve. An example of this practical approach to resolving issues came about soon after the Centrelink Personal Advisors commenced visiting prisons. This group identified the difficulties facing prisoners attempting to gather enough evidence for identification, post release, and suggested the DoJ provide Birth Certificates for all leaving prison. This is now happening.

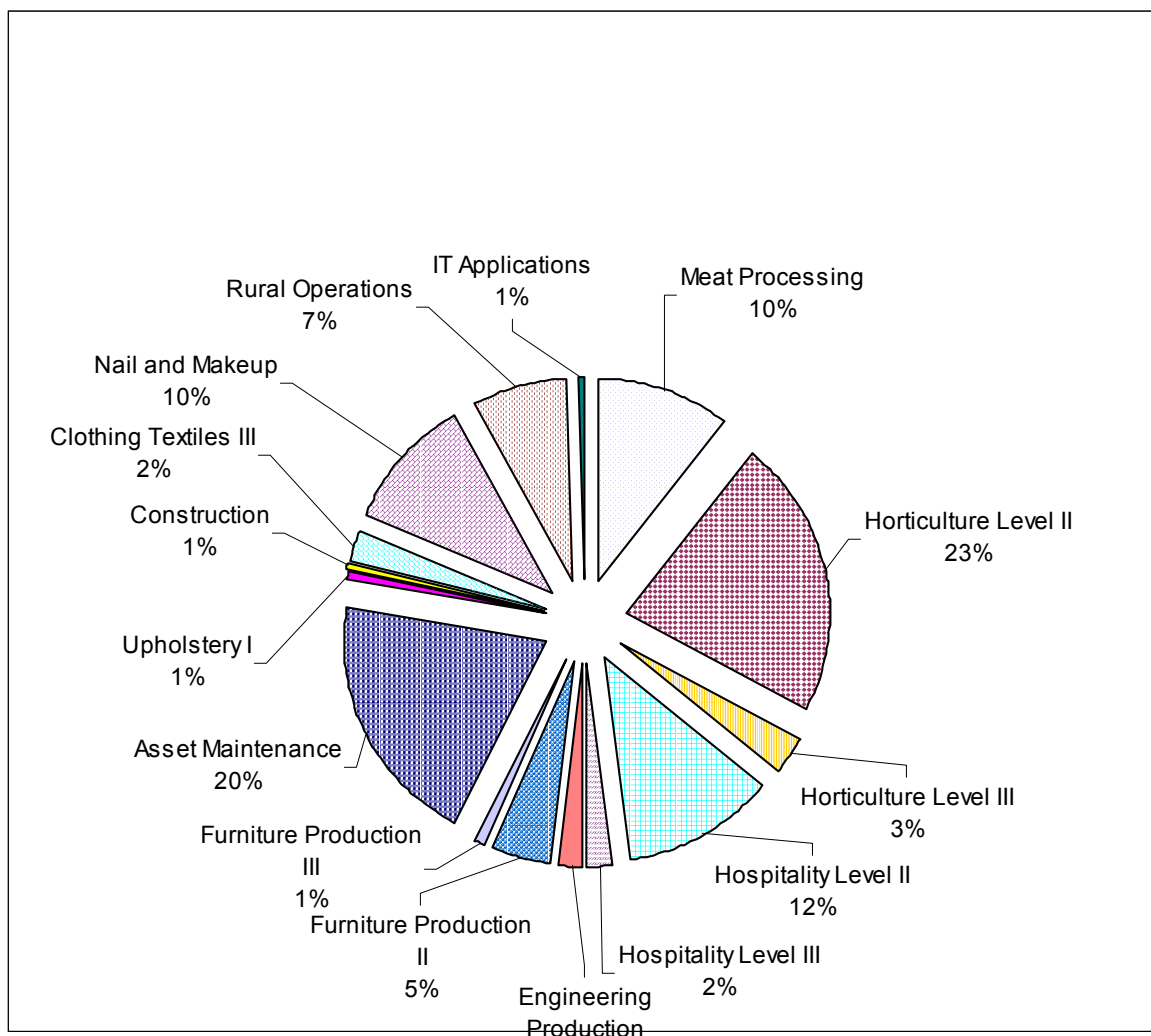
The WA prison system has reason to feel pride in their prisoner assessment, case management and sentence planning processes although they continue to be at an evolving stage with ongoing “tweaking” around the edges necessary to overcome difficulties as they present. The move towards an Integrated Prison Regime was a positive one instigated about three years ago and was implemented to ensure that all needs of an

individual prisoner were to be considered in sentence planning and placement rather than just his/her security rating as had previously been the case. “Needs” to be considered were identified as Programmatic, Counselling, Family, Cultural, Educational and release destination etc. Since the re-entry initiative gained centre stage, the need for individual case management with a single case management plan from first contact with the DoJ (in court) through custodial and/or community-based options until final contact, has been gaining impetus. This comprehensive “single plan” involving a multitude of players from across the department is proving a very difficult “ask” but continues to be the goal.

Education finds its component of this “single plan” easier to achieve, and highly desirable if what we “do inside” is to have meaningful outcomes post release. EVTU’s commitment to, and established practice of, confining correctional education delivery to accredited courses has, for many years, encouraged seamless pathways into community education placements. The re-entry agenda has broadened the EVTU role to encompass employment opportunities post release and so, not only should our VET programs link with community employment opportunities but they must be relevant to each individual prisoner’s release destination.

The most exciting aspect of the re-entry initiative has been the influence it has had on the philosophy and operational planning for the new Low Security Women’s Prison (LSWP). At this site, all women considered to be “community-safe” will be permitted to access mainstream education, training and community education institutions. Legislation is currently being prepared to extend this initiative to paid employment in the community. One of the most encouraging aspects of this prison planning process has been that great care has been taken to learn from the leaders in this field in Australia, Canada and other overseas countries. The emphasis on successful transition to the community in a women centred prison is a great step forward for WA.

Traineeships now provide a significant proportion of our prison training delivery with traineeships offered in 14 Industry Areas and growing steadily. Whilst it is our preference to have traineeships completed “inside”, there is also the option for outside completion and of course, enrolment in the next Traineeship Certificate level. The Department of Education & Training (DET) has funded a Transition Officer to work with EVTU staff to link Trainees “inside” (prior to release) with employment outside through Group Training Companies. Trainees from the Prison Abattoirs area are in great demand and many are assured of employment as soon as they are released. Recently, Horticulture trainees leaving prison too, have been experiencing significant success in moving straight into this area of employment. Of course, an added bonus in the search for employment places is that the incentive payments from the commonwealth make it attractive for the employer to take on a trainee.

Table 1: Active Traineeships – 2003

Prison industry reforms

It is probably in the prison industry area that the most satisfying gains have been made by the EVTU and this satisfaction is no doubt due to the size and number of obstacles that needed to be overcome. Prison industries have long been able to present a cogent argument for why they could not deliver accredited training and it has been a long and, at times, tortuous, road to change those well established, and system supported, views. Added to this, is the often, over-riding concern for prison industries to make a profit with training seen to “get in the way” of meeting contractual obligations. Again, the re-entry agenda assisted with its emphasis on educating and training and the need to prepare prisoners for successful community transition.

A long time coming, and not without significant input from the EVTU, has been the introduction of a new “Graded Pay Scale” for Industrial Officers. While many of these officers claim to “informally train” in their trades’ areas, they have continued to resist any new developments and cling to the systems of the “good old days” of their apprenticeship years. These new pay scales are a strong attempt to bring all new Industrial Officers into the current training arena because their rates of pay are directly linked to their willingness and competency to deliver nationally accredited training. We are not naïve enough to think

that all Industry staff will take up the challenge but already there are signs of renewed interest in what the EVTU has spent years promoting.

The education action in the Reducing Re-offending report and in a subsequent report - "Review of Training and Work Experience in Western Australian Custodial Facilities" (Jury, 2003) were quite specific in that they both stipulated that increasing skills levels above "factory line" production levels had to be the aim. Prisoners leaving prison with low vocational skills' levels will not be competitive in the employment market to attain and maintain employment. The EVTU cited research studies that indicated that boredom in repetitive, low paying work has been shown to be not enough to satisfy ex-prisoners in staying in long term employment.(Duguid,1996). Our success in this aspect has meant that all industry production contracts, work release projects, work camp projects and community service work must now demonstrate the work skills development that will lead to identified employment opportunities in the community. Assisting us in this major reform was another of the UK's Social Exclusion factors that indicated the links between unemployment and offending. Because reducing offending is an across government agenda, other agencies (local governments, conservation groups etc) assist in a consultative committee process in determining the vocational training value of projects put forward by the community. The Department of Training and local industry groups are particularly valuable in this regard across the state's regions.

In the EVTU's quest to have all prison work places and activities delivering accredited training, further impetus is being provided by a new Prisoners' Gratuities Policy which prevents prisoners not engaged in training or, having recognised qualifications, progressing beyond a middle level pay rate. This initiative is still not implemented system wide but is slowly gaining ground and is a very encouraging, and powerful, prisoner motivational tool.

Literacy deficits remain a significant learning inhibitor for many WA prisoners and while this aspect too, featured in the Education Action of the Report, it is increasingly being addressed by moving from the traditional classroom model to "on the job" delivery. The recent introduction of the "Hands On Learning Program" (HOLP) to prison workshops is receiving a pleasing response from all concerned. The team teaching HOLP is basically the CAVSS program customised to allow the option for the EVTU to record literacy gains as well as the vocational competencies, if required. The success of this initiative finds practical demonstration in a Cabinet Making production workshop where 16 of the 22 prisoners working are either registered as trainees or enrolled in clusters of units.

The EVTU is far from complacent in regard to the gains made in industry workshop reform because there are still pockets of fierce resistance that thankfully, is decreasing, albeit slowly in some instances. The last six years have seen remarkable gains and enormous change, not least of all in the way in which our own unit does its business. From being Education Centre based in 1996, and internally focussed, our staff now are much more likely to be liaising with external RTOs , community agencies and identifying training opportunities in the wider prison. Industry staff are accepting (some resigned) to the notion that the Education Officer will be involved in their workshop activities. Because the WA prison system is relatively small, the EVTU has been able to attain a position of some influence in the policy decision-making processes. A very valuable, practical outcome was the recent review into Prison Industries where its major focus was directed towards the training and work experience opportunities inside WA prisons' industries. We are, however, very aware of the cyclical nature of the correctional environment and because of our state government's determined efforts to reduce public sector funding, the EVTU

budget is increasingly strained. This fact makes it all the more imperative that we enlist the assistance of the trade and Certificate IV qualified industry officers in the delivery of VET.

One of the major issues that the WA correctional educator must address is the promotion of, the value and positive outcomes to be gained by a student pursuing further education, post release. WA correctional education and training is not just about training for immediate employment after release and any attempts to performance measure around just that outcome should be checked. In fact, research around the recidivism rate of prisoners participating in higher education would make an interesting study and needs to be conducted as a matter of priority so that the value/or otherwise of providing an educational service to this group of prisoners is known. International research studies have indicated that the recidivism rate for higher education students is relatively lower – similar research in Australia would be valuable. While there is almost universal acceptance of prisoners with low literacy levels receiving education services, there is certainly resistance amongst some in prisons, to the notion that prisoners should have access to higher education studies.

Two major reform agendas have the potential to seriously challenge the position the EVTU has established for itself in the WA prison system. The first, and probably the most likely to succeed, is the devolution of education staff and budgets from the EVTU to the Superintendents of each prison. The second is a proposal put forward by the Government's Functional Review Team that all education and training functions of government departments across government (staff training), and client groups (including prisoners) should be encompassed within the responsibilities of the Department of Education & Training. This is an intriguing aspect and one that coincides with the already busy DET agenda of having to combine into one functioning unit, the previously separate Education and Training departments. For the EVTU there are obviously busy, challenging, and probably, turbulent times ahead which will only be resolved to a satisfactory conclusion through careful consideration and close scrutiny of all the options available. With EVTU prisoner students' educational needs foremost in our minds, we look forward to these ongoing challenges with interest.

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