

PARTNERSHIPS: HOW THEY HAVE IMPROVED THE DELIVERY OF EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN WA PRISONS

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the provision of education and vocational training in adult public prisons in Western Australia. The Department of Justice (DOJ) in Western Australia includes the Education and Vocational Training Unit (EVTU) as a branch within the Prisons Division. The EVTU has established a means by which adult prisoners can gain nationally recognised and accredited training through its Registered Training Organisation (RTO), Auswest Specialist Education and Training Services (ASETS). The internal and external partnerships that support our statewide delivery will also be described in this paper.

The teaching staff and management who deliver these nationally recognised and accredited training courses are a creative frontline team who work in partnerships with Commonwealth education agencies, private training providers, TAFEWA and the Department of Education and Training. These correctional educators also establish and maintain working partnerships with prison management personnel, prison officers and other justice staff deliver in order to deliver accredited training to approximately 6000 prisoners a year in the State's 12 prisons and seven prisoner work camps.

The Western Australian correctional education service coordinated by the EVTU was recently recognised for its provision of services when it was awarded the 2004 Access and Equity Award at the Western Australian Department of Education and Training, Training Excellence Awards. The EVTU and its registered training organisation, ASETS, was subsequently nominated by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training for the National Australian Training Initiative Award in November 2004. In winning this national training award, the role of correctional education entered the mainstream vocational education and training sector as a model of best practice alongside other mainstream education and training services for adults including TAFE colleges and private agencies.

Introduction

Education and Vocational Training is provided to prisoners within the Western Australia's 12 adult public prisons by the staff of the Education and Vocational Training Unit (EVTU) as a part of the Western Australian Department of Justice (DoJ). The services offered to prisoners include adult basic education, vocational education and training, secondary and tertiary education. The courses are nationally accredited and vocational training is linked to labour market trends. The services are coordinated and delivered by trained teachers. These staff are able to work in a multidisciplinary partnerships along side justice staff (social workers, psychologists, prison officers and prisoner administrators). These educators also maintain effective partnerships with government and non-government agencies external to the prison. As educators in a correctional setting these teachers offer vocational training that is proving to be a valuable innovation that not only benefits the prisoners, their families, industry and the community – but could also save government significant money.

This prisoner training program is propelled by the Government's emphasis on rehabilitation of prisoners through education and vocational training. This is a direct result of policies to reduce prisoner re-offending rates, which reduces the social and economic costs to the community [1 and 4].

The EVTU has established a registered training organisation, Auswest Specialist Education and Training Services (ASETS) to deliver training to a uniquely disadvantaged group of students - prisoners. This registered training organisation (RTO) under the EVTU meets unmet vocational education and training (VET) demand and also offers Australian industry the opportunity to access an untapped and mostly unrecognised potential source of future employees. Education and economically sustainable employment can significantly reduce the re-offending cycle [2]. Breaking this cycle is particularly important in Western Australia, which has one of the highest rates of recidivism in the country.

In order to meet the challenges inherent in teaching and learning in prison and to applying best practice principles within the correctional education arena, the program continually aims to provide services to meet the diverse needs of its clients. The curriculum is only slightly restricted by the prison environment and the need for adherence to security measures, so the scope of delivery is unusually wide and supported external partnerships. The correctional educators who deliver education and training through ASETS – are a creative frontline team that also works in partnership with Commonwealth education agencies, private training providers, TAFEWA and the Department of Education and Training. They deliver accredited training to approximately 6000 prisoners a year in the State's 12 prisons and six prisoner work camps.

Correctional Education in Australia received welcomed recognition with the presentation of the Training Excellence Award in the Australian Training Initiative Award category to ASETS and the Western Australian Department of Justice, in 2004. The Award was issued by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), which is the Commonwealth government's chief advisory body for the national VET system. The award was in recognition of "an outstanding program developed and implemented to provide high quality vocational education and training". The award was open to all public and private RTOs nationwide, including the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges from the States and Territories across Australia.

While the ASETS decision to become an active participant of the national VET system is based on local issues and conditions, it was also informed by both international research and an increased interaction with the wider correctional education community. The results to date of the decision is that ASETS now has access to a much larger 'mainstream' educational forum in which to educate the public on the services provided by Australian correctional education. It is also able to expose the overall correctional system to VET generated initiatives that propose higher performance, effective change management, and a more transparent and accountable system of administration. The standards and guidelines that form the framework for these objectives provide a platform for the significant organizational change required to implement the correctional system support necessary to prioritise educational services within the sector. It is an extremely innovative model in terms of the organisational structure, the vocational education and training program and the delivery in that:

- It serves a unique client group with complex disadvantages;
- It operates within the correctional environment – and must be highly flexible;
- It uses partnerships with industry and training providers very successfully;
- It simultaneously addresses basic education issues with vocational education and training needs and opportunities; and

The EVTU through ASETS has set new standards for the delivery of education and vocational training services in the correctional environment with a customised organisational structure that supports innovative partnerships and promotes training and delivery. The service focuses on increasing the participation of prisoners in further education and training and providing support for students. These uniquely disadvantaged students come from diverse and challenging backgrounds – Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, women, people in transition and people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Our students are also predominately male, early school leavers, long termed unemployed and with many having an associated drug or alcohol problem; they present a challenge to teach. The job of teaching in prisons is made more complicated by the students' suffering from poor self esteem and lack of confidence within an educational setting.

The overall program is inclusive, flexible and innovative in providing training to multi-disadvantaged students. The program facilitates access to VET for all incarcerated prisoners, regardless of length of sentence. Training pathways within the correctional system and into the community also exist. Prisons have generally focussed on internal, short-term objectives that are based on maintaining everyday routines and allow for the transient nature of most of the population. Correctional education in Western Australian prisons aims to prepare prisoners for their lives post release from prison. The program in the public prison sector sees an average 52% of the prison population participating in education and training. Over the last five years the public system has facilitated the delivery of 803,100 student contact hours in 2003-04, and has assisted 1,167 Indigenous students to complete 3,440 units over the last six months (January – July 2004.)

Learning materials and services are customised to meet individual needs. Delivery strategies are also customised for courses in adult basic education, equity and access course, Noongar language, building and construction, horticulture, rural skills, hospitality and catering, information technology, art, textiles, furniture trades, laundry, asset maintenance, sports and recreation and music. The education and training program is provided by 40 education personnel, 30 industrial training personnel, and more than 100 casual tutors – all employed by the Department of Justice. Another 30 TAFE lecturers deliver training under resource agreements.

The results of the EVTU program are commendable and have attracted interest from interstate and overseas. Those results include students engaging in education and vocational training programs for the first time in their lives, which has led to increased self esteem, and confidence in a learning setting and increased motivation to want to undertake further education and vocational training. The program has increased employability upon re-entry into the community by the development of partnerships with employers that benefit the enterprise, the respective industry and the offender. These partnerships also include training providers that assist the Unit in extending their flexible learning “boundaries” and expose students to a unique market.

The model – or elements of it – are completely transferable and have attracted significant interest from interstate, New Zealand, Canada and from the United States of America.

Specific ASETS programs noted for recognition were the Hands on Learning Program, which provides vocational training student support to mainly low literacy Indigenous prisoners. The program practices contextual learning, while using a team teaching mode of delivery to assist learners who traditionally have expressed a reluctance to engage in the educational process. The development of a work experience program in meat processing for prison-based registered trainees to acquire on the job training in a commercial abattoir prior to their release, is another example of partnership arrangement. This work experience exposes trainees to the real working conditions of a commercial business enterprise while importantly, allowing them to interact with other abattoir staff that can potentially become their co-workers in the future.

The EVTU has implemented and continues to introduce initiatives that provide incentives to prisoners to re-engage in the educational process. Part of the entry process for every sentenced prisoner in WA is the development of an Individual Management Plan. This plan is key to the prisoner’s rehabilitation and includes specified and achievable academic and vocational training programs implemented by the EVTU. Each education and training program is individually tailored to meet the prisoner’s very individual needs. Each plan reflects the vocational desires of the client and is geared towards developing the skills that will contribute to a successful re-entry to the community. The EVTU provides training in areas that will enhance the personal skills of participants as well as their employability, while establishing training pathways between prisons and into the community. This process is informed by labour market research gathered from the WA State Training Strategy, the Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and other industry representatives.

Access and equity principles are at the core of planning, management and review processes within WA prisons and the EVTU’s adherence and commitment to these principles is critical to its success. Those initiatives involve identifying systemic barriers to participation and strategically negotiating suitable solutions that expand the opportunities for prisoners to access education and vocational training during their sentence. Prisoners are issued with nationally recognised qualifications from training organisations such as TAFE colleges – critically important for students who are therefore not identified as having undertaken their studies within a prison.

The EVTU has embarked on a course of continuous strategic improvement to maximise the success of program-related outcomes. In its role as a prison-based education service and a registered training organisation, it must necessarily continue to review its programs, evaluate their success and implement changes that will better facilitate meeting the needs of the client group, while addressing national VET

standards and guidelines as well as those of the Department of Justice. These changes have led to the Department of Justice prioritising education and vocational training as part of its core business in prisons.

The EVTU regularly schedules classes for both 10 weekly terms as well as short, intensive courses to meet the needs of students and ensures that opportunities for skills development and capacity building are open to all prisoners (literacy, IT, First Aid, health and hygiene, communication skills and specific trade training). It has worked with communities to form partnerships – particularly Indigenous communities in regional and remote areas – to match vocational training provided in prisons or at work camps to community needs.

Correctional education in Western Australian prisons accepts the importance of successful VET participation and achievement to both the individual client and to the general community. Consequently students can learn without reference to recommended nominal hours of instruction per unit. Additionally, small class sizes of 8-10 are offered for more individualised and effective instruction to occur. Customised learning materials are provided to suit individuals and groups. These materials are used in contexts that have relevance to the individual and maximise their engagement with the learning process.

One of the most innovative ways in which the EVTU has met clients' needs is the development of the Hands on Learning Program (HOLP). The unit held discussions with the authors of the Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) from the WA Department of Training and then developed a modified model to meet the requirements and conditions for a prison-based environment. The target group for the HOLP program are prisoners who have low-level educational attainment but have traditionally chosen to work within the prison industries rather than address their educational deficiencies by undertaking education or vocational training. The program has both theoretical and practical components and a team-teaching approach. It uses contextual learning as a mode of delivery to assist these learners who are reluctant to engage in the educational process. This is an example of a partnership between prison industries and the EVTU.

HOLP is a vocational training student support program but it differs from other vocational courses in that students do not have to be enrolled in a training package unit of competency when participating in the program. Due to the low level of educational attainment of the HOLP target group, prisoners who are capable of undertaking both the theory and the practical components enrol in an appropriate unit. The low literacy skills of most prisoners, however, preclude them from successfully completing the vocational unit, so they address their literacy skills in a practical, contextual manner while participating in the practical component of the unit.

These partnerships with prison industry have involved sentenced prisoners who are still serving their prison term developing skills whilst working in prison workshops. The program has been so successful that some prisoners have been offered jobs even before they are released. A key to the EVTU's innovative model involves partnering with enterprises to achieve better outcomes for the prisoner, the enterprise, the industry – and ultimately, the community.

For example, the Department of Justice has formed a partnership with a leading meat processing company. The EVTU clients are trained for work in the meat processing industry at the Department's Karnet Prison Farm and, through the partnership

agreement, registered trainees are now able to acquire on-the-job training in a commercial abattoir. (Although the Karnet Prison Farm has reasonable facilities and good trainers, it cannot hope to duplicate the commercial environment. Nor can it provide to prisoners the 'outside' experience.)

The meat processing industry partnerships are a prime example of how the EVTU 'target markets' training and employment opportunities for prisoners in search of industries that display a willingness to employ ex-prisoners, while also offering an increased opportunity for sustainable employment. The target marketing process is informed by employment research from relevant Commonwealth, State and local Industry labour market agencies and departments.

Conclusions

Prisoner's employment prospects are dependent in a large measure on the rehabilitation process that is made available to them. As reoffending is a major unacceptable cost to the Australian community, the goal both locally and internationally has been to address the sources of this problem. The model now accepted by governments to reduce the rates of recidivism has changed to reflect the throughcare philosophy approach that recommends that in order for the rehabilitative process to be most successful, there must be a holistic methodology applied. This has translated into a whole of government approach to the problem which seeks to improve services through effective partnerships between government and non-government agencies involved in the provision of health, housing, training, employment and family services [3]. Without the assistance of these services the opportunity to reduce recidivism is seriously undermined.

It should be noted that one of the more valuable 'partnerships' developed in trying to forge pathways to the community and assist ex-prisoners to successfully reintegrate to their communities has been the one created between correctional education and mainstream VET environment. The Commonwealth Government has recognised the role that correctional education could and does play as part of a national VET system. Mainstream VET has afforded correctional education an opportunity to participate in the progress of the national VET system. This recognition has presented correctional education with a forum in which its issues can be heard and with which it can assist its students to become law abiding participants in the community in which we all live.

The EVTU will continue to take a structured approach to both strategic and change management in order to address the future changes that will arise in national training and correctional systems. In this manner, the unit will continue to set clear key strategic priorities and alliances that will advance its provision of client centred services. The EVTU will continue to influence the reform of the prison system and the growth and sustainability of correctional education in Western Australia. [1]

The EVTU has also embarked on a program of visiting local universities to discuss correctional education as a career pathway for trainee teachers. These presentations serve to educate the students of the university and are part of a strategy to both attract new educators to the profession, as well as to promote and publicise the work of correctional educators in the community. Negotiations have commenced with Edith Cowan University and the University of Western Australian to conduct research into the impact of education and vocational training on recidivism.

If the goal is an equitable Australia that aims to achieve better access, participation and opportunity for its citizens, then an inherent objective must be to assist community

members to become active participants in the forging of a better future for all Australians. One of the ways to effectively achieve this is by forming strategic partnerships within prisons and with external agencies. Correctional educators perform their duties within this partnership context. In the absence of such partnerships, their efforts to assist students are sometimes limited by a lack of sufficient support for their programs. Therefore it is vital correctional educators continue in their efforts and partnerships, as they have traditionally done, undeterred by the resistance they face due their dedication to help their fellow Australians.

References

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