

Response to House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
(Committee) inquiry into and report on adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills
in Australia by Australasian Corrections Education Association (ACEA)

Purpose:

To inform the Committee on the importance of a supported and coordinated approach to the assessment and delivery of Language Literacy, Numeracy, Employability and Digital (LLNED) skills within Australia's Adult Corrections and Youth Justice settings

Context:

1. Relationship between illiteracy and crime

Crime is significantly linked to illiteracy¹. Up to 85 percent of juvenile delinquents are functionally illiterate.² Many prisoners have a history of being excluded from school³. Morken et al (2021)⁴ reviewed all available research into impacts of language and literacy disorders in prison populations. Their findings argued poor literacy and numeracy capability impacts on individuals' behavioural, cognitive, self-esteem and, in some cases, motor capacities thereby impacting on social and employability capabilities. This study identified links between high incidence of ADHD, dyslexia with low literacy and numeracy capabilities in adult and youth in custody compared to non-prison populations. In the UK, the Dyspel project found targeted literacy and numeracy programs delivered reduced recidivism rates. A pilot scheme was set to re-educate 50 prisoners. In the first two years of the project, only five inmates re-offended while another thirteen went back to college and four found work. The US 7 state RAND longitudinal study indicated a positive relationship between education achievement in prison can lead to reduced recidivism rates. However, there is a paucity of available research across the world and particularly in Australia which validates the valuable contribution of quality education into reduced individual reoffending.

Key initial messages:

- Literacy and numeracy programs for adult and youth offenders must be planned to encompass multifactorial learning needs of learners and be delivered by suitably qualified and experienced practitioners.
- There is a paucity of research in Australia and worldwide into the literacy and numeracy needs of those in custody and this is exacerbated by the lack of uniform approaches to identify, report and review individual language, numeracy, employability and digital literacy skills across Australian jurisdictions.

¹ [Ch02FactSheet02.pdf \(policeabc.ca\)](#)

² Literacycenterofmilford.com. (2018). Literacy Volunteers of Southern Connecticut – Literacy Volunteers of Southern Connecticut; accessed 3 February 2018 at

³ [Exploring the link between poor educational outcomes and youth crime | Capita One \(capita-one.co.uk\)](#)

⁴ Morken, Jones, Helland (2021). Disorders of language and literacy in prisons population: a scoping review. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11020077>

- There is some research indicating focused and informed literacy and numeracy programs result in positive reduction in offending behaviours however there is a need for more extensive research to base the development and deployment of good education practice throughout Australia's prisons and youth Justice systems.

2. Levels of illiteracy in incarcerated adults and youth offenders in Australia

There is no consistent practice to record the entry and exit language, literacy, numeracy, digital and employability skills of adult and youth offenders across Australian jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction uses different entry assessment methodologies and interpretation of offender entry levels or track improvement on these levels upon release or transition to community. This results in an opaque capacity to analyse national trends in the effectiveness of LLNED capability development with prison or youth justice education programs.

Recommendation: That a consistent electronic LLNED pre- and post-assessment approach and assessment tools be implemented across all jurisdictions.

Benefit: Consistent approaches facilitate consistent evidence for inter and intra jurisdiction planning and assessment of effective LLNED delivery.

3. Extent of education participation by adults in custody across Australia

The Australian Government Reports on Government Services (RoGS) records Government funded activity for corrections delivery across Australia for the financial year ending 30 June 2019, states.

			Unit	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Aust
Prisoners in education and training												
	2018-19											
		Pre-certificate Level 1 courses	%	1.3	1.5	16.3	8.2	29	9.9	38.3	–	8
		Secondary school education	%	8.5	0.7	5	–	–	–	12	–	3.6
		Vocational Education and Training	%	16.9	37.8	15.6	20.5	40	18.2	59.4	32	24.9
		Higher education	%	0.1	0.9	6.2	1.5	–	0.2	1.9	1.2	1.5
	Total											
	2018-19		%	22.9	39.5	38.2	29.7	69	24.8	70.8	33	35.1

Table 1 2018 – 2019 RoGS report on Prisoner education and training (per cent of eligible prisoners)

Interpretation:

The latest report advised that 35% of Australia's adult prisoners were engaged in some form of adult education throughout the 2018 – 2019 financial year. Compared to the total prison population 8%

were enrolled in pre certificate 1 level courses, 3.6% in secondary school subjects, 24.9% in VET courses and 1.5% in higher education programs.

The percentage breakdown of the percentage of prisoner students engaged in courses varies greatly from state to state. The following key observations are: There is a much higher engagement in pre level 1 accredited adult education programs in ACT, South Australia and Queensland than in other states or territories. ACT, Victoria and WA have a greater engagement in VET programs whilst Queensland has a significantly higher engagement in higher education programs than the other states.

Issues:

- These figures, whilst reported through RoGS, are drawn from differing methodologies for recording baseline figures in each state and ought to be noted as indicative. The caveats noted in RoGS provide an opportunity within the adult learning sector to liaise with state and federal government corrections and education agencies to strengthen the data collection methodologies to gain a clearer perspective of prisoner education engagement across Australia.
- The extent to which these figures are reflected in NCVER figures for national adult education and VET engagement is unclear because each Corrections jurisdiction reports and records its enrolment figures separately whilst education agencies record their figures via AVETMISS. AVETMISS does not produce reports on prisoner / offender participation and outcomes within their reporting suite. Youth Justice participation rates are reported through to respective state education agencies and are not consolidated.
- These figures also do not include the vast number of courses delivered by community providers to those people currently on corrections orders in the community providers or community programs or continuing education programs following parole requirements.
- These figures are based on enrolments not outcomes. The US implemented a 7-year longitudinal study tracking corrections education students' post release employment and recidivism⁵. This study provided valid evidence to inform the effectiveness of government funding contribution to raising the literacy, numeracy, digital and employability skills of those in custody. Australia does not have such evidence to inform policy and or funding strategies.

Recommendation: That clearer and consistent parameters be developed to record prisoner and young offender participation in education and training programs across all Australian jurisdictions.

Benefit: Promotes confidence in consistent and validated evidence for policy, resourcing decisions, and strategy development

Recommendation: That a longitudinal research be funded to tracking effectiveness of prisoner / offender educational outcomes resulting in employment and reduced recidivism.

⁵ Davis, Lois M., Jennifer L. Steele, Robert Bozick, Malcolm Williams, Susan Turner, Jeremy N. V. Miles, Jessica Saunders and Paul S. Steinberg, How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here? The Results of a Comprehensive Evaluation, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-564-BJA, 2014. As of April 17, 2015: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR564

Benefit: Promotes confidence in consistent and validated evidence for policy, resourcing decisions and strategy development

3.1 Australia has an extraordinary record of having an extremely high rate of indigenous Australian men and women in custody. Many incarcerated Indigenous Australians have low language and literacy rates, and many have lost the language of their community. Whilst LLNED training in English is a critical aspect of education within prison settings it is also important to support indigenous Australians to access the language and customs of respective countries. It is also important to encourage nonindigenous people to learn the languages of the first nations people on whose lands they reside.

4. Capability to deliver LLNED programs to incarcerated students within correctional facilities.

There is no preservice training focus for those preparing to teach LLNED or VET or higher education courses within custodial settings. Basic qualification requirements for those employed through TAFE or RTO providers delivering in custodial settings is a certificate 4 in Training and Assessment. There are no components with this course or Diploma VET which include an understanding of teaching students within custodial settings. All Australian jurisdictions advise on the difficulty to attract and retain suitably qualified staff capable of teaching and training in this complex learning environment. Hence investment in preparing suitable teaching professionals will lead to more sustainable learning facilitator engagement over a longer period.

Recommendation: That the House Senate Committee recommend the AISC specify units of competency focused on preparing teachers and trainers to work in custodial settings (including working with incarcerated students) be developed for the Cert 4 TAE and Dip VET.

5. Cross Government approach to develop Corrections Education standards in Australia.

Whilst UNESCO⁶, Europe⁷ and US^{8 9} have standards for the delivery of education and training programs in custodial settings, while Australia has guiding principles there are no such specific standards. The European standards apply to all European countries whilst the US standards apply to all US states and are also accepted by Canada.

Establishing Corrections education standards in Australia will establish a framework for the House senate committee to consider a framework to guide effective corrections education practice.

6. Exemplary prisoner education practice in UK

The terms of reference for responses to this inquiry seek reference to leading practice in international locations. One such leading reform in prison education approach occurred in the UK. The Coates review of education in prison in the UK¹⁰ resulted in the UK strategy of “putting education at the heart of the prison regime” by cascading accountability for access to quality education LLNED, VET and Higher Education programs at all levels of prison management.

⁶ [Convention against Discrimination in Education \(unesco.org\)](https://www.unesco.org/en/convention-discrimination-education)

⁷ [CoE Recommendations – R\(89\)12 \(epea.org\)](https://www.epea.org/)

⁸ [Standards Commission | Welcome to CEA National](https://www.ceanational.org/)

⁹ [Prisons and Jail Standards | PREA \(prearesourcecenter.org\)](https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/)

¹⁰ [Unlocking potential A review of education in prison \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/414441/unlocking-potential-a-review-of-education-in-prison.pdf)

This approach resulted in (among other aspects):

- each prisoner having:
 - an individual personal learning plan (with progress reports available in digital form);
 - access to quality programs offered by highly qualified and trained staff.
- Each prison:
 - Uses a consistent and rigorous assessment mechanism.
 - All staff (management, custodial, teaching, support) having access to appropriate professional development to ensure delivery of high-quality education programs and services.
 - Develops a framework of incentives to encourage attendance and progression in education.
 - Provides learning support for those with multiple learning needs.
- Prison management:
 - Is accountable for the achieving prescribed education performance measures.

Comment: With a focus on reducing offending patterns of individuals, the Coates review specified the importance of quality education programs targeted to supporting the language literacy, numeracy, employability and digital skills of offenders in custody. This is reinforced with a consistent performance measures, consistent assessment and review processes, skilled staffing well prepared to work in incarcerated settings and defined accountabilities for the conduct and review of these programs.

7. Conclusion

ACEA reinforces the importance of providing quality LLEND education programs delivered by qualified and experienced teachers, trainers and assessors to assist jurisdictions support offenders develop the skills required to actively participate and contribute to community cohesion.

The establishment of consistent standards, measures and approaches to track progress of individual learning plans provide a fertile resource to inform interjurisdictional policy and practice reforms as well as building a useful informative research base.

This response is compiled by the executive committee of the Australasian Corrections Education Association (ACEA) on behalf of the ACEA members.

For further details or clarification of matters raised in this response contact President Dr Ron Wilson PSM MACE at president@acea.org.au or 0412404368