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Reducing recidivism through vocational education and training programs

One of the roles of prisons is to provide an effective environment that reduces the risk of reoffending. Many offenders have education and skill levels well below the Australian average and are more likely to be unemployed, which has an impact on their health and ability to find housing. The introduction of vocational education and training (VET) programs as part of prisoner rehabilitation offers opportunities for offenders to reduce this disadvantage, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful re-integration into the community and reducing the risk of reoffending. The programs include the provision of pre-release/transition and employment programs, the opportunity to be involved in meaningful prison work, the expansion of vocational training, and more access to advice about health services, education, training and housing prior to release.

A Queensland study, based on over 1,800 people who returned to custody within three years, was undertaken of the links between prisoners' participation in the VET programs and their chances of returning to prison. It found that 32 percent of prisoners who did not participate in VET before their initial release returned to custody within two years, while only 23 percent of VET participants returned (Callan & Gardner 2007). The education programs offer literacy and numeracy courses as well as higher-level qualifications, such as VET diplomas and university degrees. The courses can be completed within the prison or through distance learning. The completion rate was found to be over 80 percent. The high completion rate was attributed to:

- undertaking a risk assessment and looking at the sentence management plan to determine the educational and VET program needs of offenders
- offering the courses as modules
- having dedicated training workshops
- promoting the employment opportunities provided by the training
- recognising the achievements of students who completed a course.

Prisoners believed that as well as providing technical skills, the courses also improved their communication and organisational skills, all of which would help them find employment and re-integrate into the community upon release.

Barriers to undertaking or completing VET courses include the need for prisoners to undertake offending behaviour programs and their desire to earn money through paid prison work. Other factors were short sentences (under 12 months) and long waiting lists for courses, being transferred to another centre without much notice or being released early. There also exists, amongst some custodial staff, the view that prisons are primarily places of correction, not training. These barriers can be overcome by arranging for courses to be held at times that did not conflict with behaviour management courses or paid work opportunities, through consultation with sentencing and releasing authorities, and through cultural and structural change.

Reference

Callan V & Gardner J 2007. The role of VET in recidivism in Australia, in Dawe S (ed), *Vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia: research readings*. Adelaide: NCVER: 27–36.
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1789.html>