



EDUCATION IN PRISON

June 2010

“A society should be judged not by how it treats its outstanding citizens but by how it treats its criminals” – Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), writer and Orthodox Christian

“It was education, plain and simple, that changed the way I think. It changed the way I look at the world. It probably changed the way the world looks at me. I know it’s not for everybody – you can’t walk into a prison and say education is going to change everything – although I think it would go a damn long way towards it” - Vicki Roach

The Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania supports a restorative and rehabilitative justice system, with imprisonment as the last resort. Each person has inherent and equal dignity, should be respected, and lives in relationship to others. The Uniting Church in Australia supports the human rights standards recognised by the United Nations. The *United Nations Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners* and *Revised Standard Guidelines for Correctional Facilities* provide standards in the areas of education, vocational training and employment, including:

- all prisoners should have the right to engage in cultural and educational activities aimed at the full development of the human personality as well as to develop appropriate skills which will assist them to become law-abiding citizens post release;
- prisoners undertaking full time studies should be remunerated equivocally to prisoners who work full time; and,
- a high priority should be given to courses and programs that address literacy and numeracy and that relevant prisoners should be encouraged to engage in such programs but not feel compelled.

Education in prisons is supported in all Australian jurisdictions but is mandated by legislation only in Victoria. In Tasmania and Victoria programs are provided by a range of educational institutions and include certificate level vocational education as well as basic numeracy and literacy courses. Tasmanian law does not state any specific clause determining a prisoner’s right to education; however, it does allow for a prisoner to apply for leave from prison to attend a place of education or training in connection to a course of education or training.

The Importance of Education

Analysis shows a drop of 24%-28% in the rate of repeat offending associated with involvement by offenders in vocational education and training programs. There is a negative relationship between low levels of education, repeat imprisonment and criminal activity; conversely, educational attainment is associated with better employment prospects and higher income.

Education and training opportunities (including those with programs addressing basic literacy and numeracy, basic life skills and vocational education and training) improve general communication, time management, planning, organisational and decision making skills amongst offenders. Education can have a significant impact in enhancing and maintaining knowledge and skills that will contribute to an offender’s employability and reintegration into the community post release, and assist them to live a crime free life.

Vicki Roach (see quote above), was instrumental in the High Court appeal to challenge the constitutional validity of a ban on all prisoners voting imposed by the Commonwealth Government in 2006. During her sentence, she finished a master’s degree and the first year of her PhD all without the use of the internet. Other prisoners have expressed difficulties in enrolling in and completing educational programs particularly higher education courses due to problems in accessing the course materials. As internet access is not allowed under any circumstances, including for educational purposes, within prisons, the delivery of course materials becomes problematic.

Background Information & Government Initiatives

In the 2008-2009 period, 34.7% of Victorian and 33.9% of Tasmanian prisoners were involved in an educational program. The figures for Victoria have remained relatively stable over the last five years.

In Tasmania, these figures have dramatically dropped in the past 12 months particularly in Vocational Education and Training studies (which most prisoners are enrolled in) due to the removal of employee training incentives as a result of funding issues. In Victoria, it appears that there has not been a commensurate funding increase to address increases in numbers of prisoners; however, publicly available information is not easily accessible in this area. Also, it is unclear if recent changes to the training system in Victoria (e.g. students aged 20 who already have a degree or diploma must now pay the full cost of further training at the same or lower level) will have an adverse impact on prisoners.

The Department of Corrections Tasmania is currently developing a ten year strategic plan to address the problems associated with the ongoing prison cycle that many offenders find themselves in, entitled "Breaking the Cycle". The Victorian Department of Corrections is currently developing a research strategy and agenda which focuses on researching areas related to the educational skills of prisoner populations in order to recommend changes to the prisoner educational system that will assist offenders to live a crime free life post release.

ACT – WRITE A RESPECTFUL EMAIL OR LETTER TODAY

Contact the Minister for Corrections Victoria, the Hon. Bob Cameron or the Minister for Corrections and Consumer Protection Tasmania, the Hon. Nick McKim and express your thanks that steps are now being taken in order to research and change the educational needs of prisoners; in addition express the following points:

- Increasing the availability (cost) and scope (beyond certificate level) of education programs may go a long way in assisting the reduction of re-offending rates
- For Tasmania – there should be a legislated guarantee for the availability of education for prisoners
- For Victoria – changes to Vocational Education and Training provision should not be applied in such a way that will adversely impact on prisoners
- Research into the desirability of providing prisoners supervised access to the internet for educational purposes is needed.

Basing your points on those raised above *and elsewhere in this fact sheet*, write a respectful email or letter (in your own words):

Hon. Bob Cameron

Minister for Corrections, Level 26, 121
Exhibition St, Melbourne, 3000.
Bob.Cameron@parliament.vic.gov.au

Hon. Nick McKim

Minister for Corrections (and Consumer
Protection), Level 9, 1 Franklin Warf,
Hobart, 7000
nick.mckim@parliament.tas.gov.au

Please send any replies that you may receive the **Justice and International Mission Unit**, Level 3, 130 Little Collins Street, Melbourne Victoria 3000 / jim@victas.uca.org.au

SOURCES: Victorian Department of Justice, Tasmanian Department of Justice, Commonwealth Government Productivity Commission, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, The Age, Victorian Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner, Australasian Corrections Education Association, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Our special thanks to Emily Smith (criminologist and volunteer researcher)