

# Reconceptualising and humanising support for incarcerated students

Kate Derrington, Lead Learning Advisor, University of Southern Queensland  
Kacie Fahey, Learning Advisor (First Nations), University of Southern Queensland  
Stephen Seymour, Coordinator, Designated Cohorts, University of Southern Queensland

## Abstract

*Engagement in education whilst incarcerated is recognised as a pathway to rehabilitation and reducing recidivism. However, the study experience of incarcerated students is reported as being dehumanising. This emerging initiative aims to develop “fit for purpose” academic skills videos to reflect minority cohorts instead of repurposing existing support for this offline context. These resources will be mindful of the characteristics of incarcerated cohorts who may be keen to learn but may have low literacy levels, learning difficulties and disabilities. Reflective of the disproportionate numbers in incarceration, the resources will incorporate First Nations perspectives through co-design. This initiative is grounded in transition pedagogy. Students are anticipated to feel more supported as these resources will build academic skills, humanise study while incarcerated, and improve the transition to study post incarceration.*

## Rationale

The University of Southern Queensland's (UniSQ) incarcerated student strategy, formerly the “Making the Connection” project recognises the difficulty of incarcerated students’ participation in increasingly online environments (Farley & Hopkins, 2017). This program makes education accessible by replicating existing online courses available in the university Learning Management System (LMS), in an offline space (Farley & Hopkins, 2017). While replicating the LMS attempts to afford equitable access, the reality of prison education is that it is mediated by prison education officers, and this can result in a dehumanised study experience (Farley & Hopkins, 2017). Participation in education is recognised as a pathway out of incarceration, a contributor to rehabilitation (Farley & Hopkins, 2017), a means of reducing recidivism (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2012) and has the potential to reduce security breaches (Farley & Pike, 2016). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2021) incarcerated populations have specific educational needs, due to “... lower levels of educational attainment and higher levels of learning difficulties and learning disabilities than... the general community”. First Nations people are disproportionately represented in prisons at 31.87% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022a) despite representing 3.2% of the broader population (ABS, 2022b). Incarcerated students therefore would benefit from more timely access to culturally safe Learning Advisor (LA) support (Lee et al., 2017).

## Approach/method

This initiative aims to create support for learning resources that meet the needs of incarcerated students. Drawing on transition pedagogy (Kift, et al., 2010), belonging, inclusion and student identity are fundamental. Video resources are appropriate to develop this identity, reduce incarceration's “dehumanisation” and vulnerability (Farley & Hopkins, 2017) and mitigate the lack of timely access to LAs. The choice of video with transcripts is intentional and will

approach from a non-deficit lens, catering for low educational attainment and learning difficulties (Buckley and Nerantzi, 2020).

This initiative is a collaboration in the Support for Learning team between the Lead Learning Advisor, the Learning Advisor (First Nations) and the Coordinator, Designated Cohorts. The LA (First Nations) will co-design content from a culturally safe lens. This reflects UniSQ's First Nations Blueprint and acknowledges UniSQ's imperative to improve educational outcomes for First Nations students. Evaluating incarceration initiatives is a challenge, therefore the Coordinator, Designated Cohorts will utilise established connections to assist with data collection. This initiative is expected to support students with their studies while incarcerated and improve the transition to study post incarceration.

### Questions for audience discussion

1. What principles could you apply to your context or to other equity cohorts?
2. How could you better embed a First Nations' voice in your approaches?

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