

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN NORTHERN TERRITORY CORRECTIONAL CENTRES

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Introduction

In the Vocational Education and Training (VET) context best practice is “a comprehensive, integrated and co-operative approach to the continuous improvement of all facets of our organisations operations” (Best Practice and Benchmarking in Vocation Education and Training). Best practice within Northern Territory Correctional Services (NTCS) Prisoner Education unit has been achieved through the implementation of programs that focus on an integrated holistic approach to Offender Management. Best Practice is achieved through a flexible approach that links activity and shares information.

Major factors associated with offending and recidivism in the Northern Territory are poor employment prospects, weak skills and low education levels, poor socioeconomic standards, and the harmful use of alcohol and other drugs. Through a collaboration between NTCS Prisoner Education, Alcohol and Other Drugs Unit, and other prison programs a holistic intervention project known as “Ending Offending – Our Message” has been introduced which addresses offending behaviour and at the same time specific VET learning outcomes and competencies.

The national framework used to guide and develop Prisoner Education in the Northern Territory (NT) is the National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training for Adult Prisoners and Offenders in Australia recently endorsed by Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers of Corrections and Training. This document sits within the National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training, and provides guidelines and direction for State and Territory Correctional Services to ensure that “adult prisoners and offenders are able to access vocational education and training programs throughout the term of their sentence”. The strategy is underpinned by the following principles, which have enabled best practice interventions to be implemented for Indigenous prisoner VET in the NT:

- Prisoners should be encouraged to access accredited VET programs;
- VET programs should be an integral part of prisoner management plans, and recognised as integral to the rehabilitative process for prisoners;
- Education and training pathways are developed, and delivery is flexible, so that it accommodates the prisoner’s sentence term and individual learning needs;
- Delivery of VET should meet the standard of delivery which is available in the community;
- Courses should have meaningful outcomes in relation to employment opportunities, and can articulate with further education and training available on release; and
- Models should be developed to reflect best practice for addressing the differing learning needs of minority/disadvantaged groups (i.e. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders).

Background

Prisoner Education is located within the Offender Management Branch (OMB) of Northern Territory Correctional Services (NTCS). NTCS is a Quality Endorsed Training Organisation (QETO) registered to provide vocational education and training. Prisoner Education began operating in September 1993. The program delivers and supports a wide range of nationally accredited courses and modules, which provide prisoners with opportunities for employment and further study on release.

The purpose of Prisoner Education is to provide access to education and vocational training for all adult prisoners in NT Correctional Centres. The program meets the NTCS strategic goal of Rehabilitation and Personal Development by providing opportunities that increase an offender's chance to contribute positively towards society upon release. Through the promotion of educational, vocational, social and living skills Prisoner Education seeks to increase the likelihood that prisoners will successfully re-integrate into the community on their release, and thus reduce the rate of recidivism.

Statistics contained in the NTCS Annual Report (1997/1998) indicate that approximately 73% of prisoners in custody in the Northern Territory are of Indigenous descent, most of whom are from remote and rural communities. Alcohol related offences account for approximately 75% of all imprisonments in the NT, and the recidivism rate is 35%. The average age of Indigenous prisoners is 30 years. Surveys conducted against the literacy course matrix (ILCM) have indicated that the majority of Indigenous prisoners have an educational levels in assessed at stages one and two on a scale of one to four. Clients assessed as stage one need intensive literacy / numeracy support as they are only able to identify personal, concrete and familiar contexts that assist with their immediate needs only. The need to develop culturally appropriate and relevant alcohol and drug interventions, and education and training programs to enhance skills development is evident. The "Ending Offending – Our Message" project is a best practice intervention for Indigenous prisoners that is underpinned by a holistic and integrated approach to address behaviour, and to facilitate the development of skills and knowledge.

Case Study "Ending Offending – Our Message" Project

Using the primary mediums of art and music the project endeavours to provide real opportunities for prisoners to develop skills in these areas by producing artwork, a music CD, a website (www.ourmessage.org), video and stories whilst exploring, conceptualising and sharing with others their stories about drinking, offending, culture, family, country and community. Participants are enrolled in nationally accredited modules and units from the following courses:

- Certificate II in Art and Craft;
- Certificate in Entry Level Music Industry Skills;
- Certificate I in General Education;
- Certificate in Access to Employment and Further Study; and
- National Office Skills.

This project has resulted in increased enrolments in all of these courses. Over 150 male and female prisoners are involved in the project (out of a total of approximately 600 inmates). Participants realise that the skills they learn will be transferable to their life situation when they are released from prison.

Indigenous communities have become involved in the project through consultation and networking with community councils and community based alcohol program workers. An interactive website has been developed which will allow feedback from the community. An exhibition of the Artwork produced will also tour to remote communities after major exhibitions in Darwin and Alice Springs. A music CD will also be for sale and previous experience has shown that this type of product is highly sought after by Indigenous people. As a consequence messages carried on the CD will be heard by a wide audience in both urban and remote centres.

Networking and collaboration with the community also allows prisoners the opportunity to communicate with, and make a contribution to their home community. This fulfills Claassen's (1996) fundamental principles of "Restorative Justice" which:

- Is a process to "make things right" by attending to the needs created by the offence, and those needs related to the cause of the offence (addiction, lack of social skills, employment skills and work opportunities);
- Encourages the offender to learn new ways of acting and being in community, and thus encourage healing in their relationship with the community; and
- Encourages offenders to learn new skills so that they can become a productive member of society on their release.

This project also exemplifies best practice standards by meeting the principles, which set the national benchmark, outlined in the National Strategy for VET for Adult Prisoners.

Prisoners should be encouraged to access accredited VET programs

Participation in the project is voluntary. This encourages clients to take responsibility for their own learning. Programs are constantly modified, mainly in response to client feedback. In the prison environment inmates are given very little opportunity to make decisions, thus the opportunity to have input and ownership of their educational program is a boost to their self-esteem.

VET programs should be an integral part of prisoner management plans, and recognised as integral to the rehabilitative process for prisoners

Participation in educational programs can enhance the inmate's quality of life within the prison by providing offenders with an opportunity to occupy time, and to learn new skills. This results in improved self-esteem. Education is integral to prison management, and to personal rehabilitation. Education provides an opportunity through the promotion and development of vocational, social and living skills for a prisoner to successfully re-integrate into the community on their release. The national VET strategy for prisoners acknowledges that VET programs should be resourced to deliver skills training that can be utilised by those prisoners returning to isolated communities.

Education and training pathways are developed, and delivery is flexible, so that it accommodates the prisoner's sentence term and individual learning needs

Clients undertake an initial assessment and an educational program is subsequently developed. The assessment recognises prior learning and life experience, personal interests, cultural background, skills and talent (ie. art /music). Employment opportunities in the client's home community are also profiled, and may influence the development of the education and training program. Providing a flexible learning environment is essential. VET must fit in with prison routines and procedures. Clients' individual learning styles and different needs must also be accounted for. The key to success has been to provide an accessible educational environment, with innovative new programs that meet clients' needs and expectations.

Delivery of VET should meet the standard of delivery which is available in the community

Achieving Quality Endorsed Training Organisation (QETO) status provided NTCS with a process of continual improvement. QETO allows us to continue to monitor, evaluate and refine our processes and procedures, and to develop and improve our systems so that best practice is maintained. The ongoing audit process of QETO will allow recognition of best practice in the operational aspects of design and delivery of VET and thus form the basis of continual improvement. Auditing allows us to ensure that data gathered is valid and reliable.

Development of a Prisoner Education database has facilitated the monitoring of activity, and supports the validation of activity. It allows us to collect baseline data for benchmarking against other jurisdictions. This has assisted with staff accountability and supported evaluation processes. It enables us to ensure that our operational practices and standards meet the requirements of a range of stakeholders, and demonstrate best practice.

Courses should have meaningful outcomes in relation to employment opportunities, and can articulate with further education and training available on release

The “Ending Offending – Our Message” project will further develop skills which may enhance the participants employment opportunities on release. The number of Indigenous people involved in the art and music industries far exceeds the Indigenous proportion of Australia’s population (1%). In 1998 Indigenous artists produced 68% of Australian art sold overseas (Tom Redston personal communication). During the same period 23% of contemporary music sales were from Indigenous performers. The mediums of Art and Music present an opportunity for Indigenous people to be employed in these activities in their home communities where very little other work opportunities exist.

Models should be developed to reflect best practice for addressing the differing learning needs of minority/disadvantaged groups (ie. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders)

Being a client focused organisation we must identify the needs and expectations of our Indigenous clients in order to change, improve and grow. Surveys assist in this process, and staff input is also vital for the improvement of courses and processes. The ability to satisfy the clients’ needs comes from being empowered to make the necessary decisions. It is about being flexible, using common sense and treating clients as you would wish to be treated yourself in similar circumstances.

Understanding the clients’ needs also involves listening, observing, empathising and respecting their needs, and being optimistic about their motivation and intentions, and their future. By incorporating Prisoner Education into a holistic approach to offender management we have been able to develop a model that reflects best practice.

The “Ending Offending – Our Message” project further demonstrates best practice by meeting the strategies developed in the recently released National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1999 – 2003. The vision for vocational education and training for Indigenous Australians sets out to achieve:

A vocational education and training system which renews and shares an Indigenous learning culture with all Australians in a spirit of reconciliation, equity, justice, and community economic development and sustainability.

The “Ending Offending – Our Message” project involves Indigenous people in decision making, achieves flexible delivery outcomes, exposes participants to information technology, and forges a closer link between VET outcomes for Indigenous people and their community development and employment opportunities. Further, the project facilitates cultural affirmation, self-determination, reconciliation, and collaboration and dialogue between Indigenous organisations, government and other stakeholders.

NTCS Prisoner Education achieves best practice in Indigenous VET by undertaking a holistic approach that addresses offender behaviour by simultaneously facilitating and linking treatment programs and educational activity. The National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training for Adult Prisoners and Offenders in Australia, along with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy for Vocational Education and Training provide the framework that underpins all activity.

References

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