Introduction

Corrections Victoria contributes to improved community safety by providing a wide range of offender management services to promote positive behavioural change and address social disadvantage, including provision of vocational education and training (VET) services in Victorian prisons.

Research demonstrates that where VET programs are effectively designed and implemented, they contribute to reducing recidivism. Evidence also indicates that participation in VET programs improves employment and health outcomes for prisoners (Callan & Gardner, 2007). A prisoner’s capacity to successfully complete other programs designed to address offending behaviour is also likely to be enhanced by participation in VET programs, particularly where it aims to improve prisoners’ language, literacy and numeracy skills (Cox, 2009). Corrections Victoria is responsible for the operation of the adult corrections system, including the management of Victoria’s 11 public prisons and oversight of the two privately operated prisons.

Corrections Victoria acknowledges the many benefits of facilitating prisoners’ access to and participation in prison based education and training programs, including the link between prison participation in VET and a reduction in recidivism.

Since 2006 Victoria has experienced a significant increase in its daily average prisoner population. Between March 2006 and June 2011, Victoria experienced a 30 per cent increase in the prison population and numbers have continued to increase since this time. As at 13 September 2011 there were 4,761 prisoners in custody in Victoria (4,438 males and 323 females) and this population was made up of 3,887 sentenced prisoners and 874 prisoners on remand.

Corrections Victoria’s strategic response to the challenge of increasing prisoner numbers is to develop and implement innovative solutions to divert offenders from prison custody and to reduce recidivism. Clearly, education is a cost-effective solution and its impact on recidivism and public safety is well documented (Esperian, 2010). However, although Victoria’s prisoner population has increased over the past decade,
funding for VET has not kept pace with such growth. This has significantly impacted on Victoria’s ability to engage prisoners in education and training, with prisoner participation in VET programs declining from 41.2 per cent in 2002 to 33.2 per cent in 2010.

In mid 2010, the Victorian Government approved a significant increase in funding for education and training in prisons, which will result in funding progressively increasing from $7.07m in 2010 to $12.19m in 2013. Further, approval was obtained to transfer responsibility for the funding and delivery arrangements for education and training provision from Skills Victoria, an agency of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to Corrections Victoria. New responsibility for, and funding of VET provides Corrections Victoria with the opportunity to strengthen the access, relevance and efficiency of VET and integration into the overall offender and sentence management frameworks. Combined with the transfer of contract management arrangements, this funding increase affords Corrections Victoria the opportunity for the first time to approach the policy challenge of increased prisoner numbers through provision of an effective VET system that reduces recidivism by targeting the most disadvantaged prisoners.

In 2011, Corrections Victoria developed an Education and Training Strategy (the Strategy), which outlines the policy framework for prison-based education and training. The strategy represents the first step towards a cohesive education and training system in Victorian prisons.

The key features are:

- identifying prisoners who present with the greatest educational and employment disadvantage
- assessing prisoners for literacy and numeracy deficits
- actively engaging disadvantaged prisoners into education
- focusing on literacy and numeracy and vocational skills development
- aligning prison VET with areas of community skills shortage.

Objective
This paper will provide an overview of the status of education and training in Victorian prisons and future policy directions. In particular, this paper will detail the changes that Corrections Victoria will implement to improve the delivery of the education and training service in 2012-13 and discuss the challenges in developing an integrated system that
supports prisoners to obtain employment outcomes post-release and reduce re-offending.

**Increasing prisoner VET participation**

In recognition of Victoria’s increasing prisoner numbers and the importance of education and training in reducing recidivism, Corrections Victoria began to supplement Skills Victoria funding for education and training in Victorian prisons in 2009. This enabled the introduction of a number of strategies to improve prisoner participation. Whilst prisoner participation in VET had significantly declined from 2003, this funding contribution in 2009 marked the improvement of prisoner participation in VET as indicated in *Figure 1.*

![Figure 1: Prisoner Participation in VET in Victoria](image)

Corrections Victoria will aim to continue to increase prisoner participation in VET programs in 2012-13 to 40 per cent of the eligible prison population to improve opportunities to reduce recidivism.

**Targeting prisoners for VET participation**

There is extensive research demonstrating that employment is a ‘protective’ factor against offending (Rossman and Neusteter, 2010) and ample evidence that poor language and literacy levels are factors leading to social marginalisation and life-long disadvantage (Royal Children’s Hospital, 2008). Whilst all prisoners have a right to access education in prison, Corrections Victoria will seek to prioritise access to those who present with the greatest level of education and employment disadvantage.

Victorian prisoners experience significant levels of ‘dual’ disadvantage, in that they had not completed secondary school and were unemployed at the time of reception. Two thirds (63 per cent) of Victorian prisoners in custody at June 2011 were unemployed.
upon reception and 91 per cent had not completed secondary school (or equivalent). In total, fifty-eight per cent of Victoria’s prison population could be described as having dual disadvantage, which has increased from 52 per cent in 2004. Furthermore, 68 per cent of Aboriginal prisoners and 64 per cent of prisoners under the age of 30 experienced dual disadvantage. While female prisoners are more likely to have completed secondary school than their male counterparts, they still experience significant levels of unemployment prior to imprisonment. As at June 2011, 47 per cent of female prisoners reported that they were unemployed prior to imprisonment compared with 64 per cent of male prisoners. While male prisoners appear to experience higher rates of unemployment, it should be noted that female prisoners are also more likely to report that they were in receipt of a pension or undertaking home duties immediately prior to imprisonment.

While participation in education is voluntary, from 2012 Corrections Victoria will target prisoners who present with the greatest educational and employment disadvantage for VET participation. Prisoners who experience dual disadvantage and all Aboriginal prisoners will receive prioritised access to education and training.

**Developments in Assessment and Planning Services**
In January 2009, Corrections Victoria directed additional funding to education providers to deliver for the first time, assessment and planning services in prisons. These included the introduction of Language Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) Assessments, Skills Plans and distance education support services.

Research funded by the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) indicates that 75 per cent of employers were concerned about the impact of poor literacy and numeracy on their business. Functional literacy and numeracy is commonly described as reading and writing skills that are adequate to meet the demands of everyday life. These skills are essential for gaining and sustaining employment and civic participation. In relation to employment, higher levels of literacy and numeracy are particularly important where a person is learning a new job function (Australian Industry Group, 2010). Preliminary findings from LLN assessments of prisoners in Victoria support findings from assessments undertaken across Australian correctional institutions that there are more prisoners with poor basic LLN skill levels than in the general population. Of concern is that many prisoners do not have functional literacy and numeracy let alone the higher level required to adapt to changing job requirements. As from January 2012, LLN assessments will be
conducted for all prisoners who are identified as being in the target groups for education and training. It is further intended that additional LLN assessments will be conducted for all prisoners who have completed VET in prison prior to release to measure the level of improvement in LLN levels. Corrections Victoria also expects to pilot a computer-based literacy and numeracy assessment tool. In 2012-13, Corrections Victoria will fund approximately 6000 LLN assessments, representing a significant increase from the number of assessments conducted in the 2009-2011 period.

Continuing in 2012, a key focus of prisoner education and training will be the delivery of adult basic education (ABE) courses. Various levels of the Certificate of General Education for Adults (i.e. initial to Certificate III), will be offered with sufficient frequency to satisfy the needs at each prison location.

In 2012-13, Corrections Victoria will implement a vocational counselling model in Victorian prisons, whereby vocational counsellors will meet with prisoners who express an interest in enrolling in education and training. Vocational counsellors will assist prisoners to articulate vocational goals and make recommendations regarding education and training enrolments, which will be documented in a prisoner learning plan. The learning plan will clearly identify:

- prisoner employment objectives
- specific vocational training that may be required to achieve objectives
- any requirement for ABE as indicated by the prisoner’s literacy and numeracy assessment results.

**Improved data and performance management of VET**

From 2012 education providers will be required to deliver a system focussed education service in accordance with contract specifications and performance measures. Education providers will also be required to provide services under a teaching hour model rather than student contact hour model. Performance measures to be introduced in 2012 include module completions, average monthly class sizes, LLN and Vocational Counselling completions and data supply.

Corrections Victoria is developing an electronic, whole of system education module that will form part of a larger prisoner and offender management database. This module will, for the first time, centrally record current and historical enrolment information and will be accessible by both Corrections Victoria staff and education providers.
Furthermore, to assist in planning education enrolments, education providers will be able to access information regarding a prisoner’s scheduled release date and some offence related information. Additional information such as literacy and numeracy assessment results and learning plans will be accessible via pdf attachments in the first phase of the module and will be entered into ‘smart forms’ as part of the second phase. These smart forms will allow the information to be reported on and will facilitate system-wide and location specific analysis. Critically, the education module will collect information that has not before been centrally collated by Corrections Victoria and will enable performance monitoring and system wide planning to occur.

A new service delivery model
Corrections Victoria will aim to strengthen the access, relevance and efficiency of prisoner education, and more effectively integrate prisoner education into the overall offender and sentence management frameworks. Corrections Victoria is currently recruiting seven senior education officers to provide a range of support, coordination and planning services to public prisons. Key features of this role will include developing and implementing new business processes to increase prisoner participation in VET, improving case management coordination to facilitate the implementation of prisoner learning plans, and providing distance education support to prisoners.

An additional feature of the new service delivery model will be to introduce standardised VET courses across the system, which aligns with skills shortages in the community. Corrections Victoria is committed to providing prisoners with vocationally focussed education and training in areas that lead to sustainable employment. The 2012 course offerings have been developed having regard to both prison industry requirements and the industries that prisoners are most likely to secure employment post release. This includes an analysis of current and projected skills shortages in industries for which a criminal record is unlikely to be an impediment to employment. A system of rolling enrolments will also be introduced to allow a prisoner to begin a course or unit of competency at any stage. This system is particularly relevant to prisoners given the transitional nature of the population.

Distance Education Support
Study via distance education is available for prisoners wishing to access courses not offered by the education provider within the prison. Distance education comprises higher education courses as well as VET level courses. Since 2009 Corrections
Victoria has funded providers to deliver distance education support services to prisoners. Demand for distance education support has and continues to outweigh the level of support that Corrections Victoria has historically provided for it. However, Corrections Victoria acknowledges that prisoners can effectively undertake study through distance education at both VET and tertiary level and as such, will continue to support prisoners undertaking distance education through the provision of support services.

Developing employment opportunities for prisoners
A key focus of Corrections Victoria’s strategy is to continue to develop employment opportunities for prisoners through implementing a vocational services model in prison industries.

In 2007, Corrections Victoria commissioned the University of Sydney’s Workplace Research Centre to review the operation of its Prison Industries Program. This project was commissioned in recognition of the changing labour market and opportunities for prison industries to play a central role in supporting reducing recidivism by developing skills relevant to the contemporary labour market, thereby enhancing prisoners’ prospects of employment on release from prison. One of the recommendations of the Review was the trial of a new model for prison industries, known as the Industry Skills Centre (ISC) program.

The ISC program model combines structured workplace learning and work-readiness programs with strategically targeted employment support. The larger aim of the program is to improve employment outcomes for prisoners upon their release from prison. In 2008, five prison sites were approved to take part in the pilot and employment preparation, placement and support services were procured from the Group Training Association of Victoria (GTAV) for prisoners at these locations. The program is currently in its fourth year of delivery. A significant change to the model during this time includes the engagement of additional staff (field officers) at each of the five prison locations.

Thus far, the ISC program has demonstrated some real success. During 2010-11, 270 prisoners participated in the ISC program and ninety-four prisoners were released during this period. Within the released group, 55 per cent secured employment, while another 13 per cent were placed into further training. Figure 2 demonstrates employment and training outcomes for each ISC program location.
The program supports approximately 100-125 prisoners annually and 20-25 participants are supported at each prison site per quarter. A key focus of the program in this current funding period will be the continued strengthening of relationships with industry bodies and employer / employment networks.

Corrections Victoria will continue to align prisoner education and training with prison industries. This will require a cultural change within prison industries to a vocational services model that seeks to develop the employability skills of prisoners, replicate areas where there are skills shortages and develop partnerships with industries who undertake to employ prisoners post-release.

*Koori Education Training and Employment Strategy 2011-13*

The need to address the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the corrections system remains a strategic priority for Corrections Victoria. Over the last decade Corrections Victoria has invested significant resources to implement a range of initiatives that target the offence specific and related needs of Aboriginal prisoners and offenders, including the commissioning of Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place and the employment of a Koori Justice Employment Broker.

The Koori Education Training Employment Strategy 2011-13 provides a policy framework that when implemented as part of a broader set of reforms across the corrections education sector, will provide enhanced opportunities for Aboriginal prisoners to participate in a range of accredited VET courses and employment.
initiatives while in prison. By 30 June 2013 it is expected that 60 per cent of Aboriginal prisoners will be participating in education – 20 per cent more than the total prison population. Through flexible approaches aimed at removing identified barriers to VET participation and employment, and targeted programs and initiatives such as Learning Plans, and intensive language and numeracy support, the strategy aims to redress Koori disadvantage.

Conclusion

New contractual and funding responsibility provides the opportunity to strengthen the access, relevance and efficiency of vocational education and training and integration into the overall offender and sentence management frameworks. A system wide approach to VET that utilises LLN assessments and prisoner learning plans to guide VET enrolments in standardised courses aligned to community skills shortages, will provide Victorian prisoners with very real opportunities to obtain employment post-release and break the offending cycle.
Reference List


