This paper will argue that providing offenders with vocational training and education will provide significant benefits in addressing issues that caused the original offences, as well as reduce their recidivism rates. Offender’s lack of educational attainment negatively impacts on their employment prospects which also negatively flow on affect physical and mental health issues. By providing motivated offender’s the opportunity to train and educate themselves, the offender’s life can improve through the experiences of discipline, confidence building, as well as stability.

A striking feature of offenders profiling is that of their poor level of educational attainment. The Australian Institute of Criminology (2010, 22) data illustrates that while those with low education attainment have a higher probability of becoming a police detainee, those with higher education attainment, have a lower probability of becoming a police detainee. This is highlighted by the fact that while 48 per cent of male police detainees, and 51 per cent of female police detainees had completed year ten or less. The number of male and female police detainees more than halved had they completed year 11 or twelve. For those who had completed university, the level of female police detainees was five per cent, while male police detainees were at four per cent.

However, while low educational standards are of great concern, of particular note is the fact that many offenders lack even the basic fundamentals of education such as literacy skills. Cameron (2001, 3) describes illiteracy rates among New South Wales prisoners as high as 60 per cent.
Poor educational attainment correlates directly with poor employment prospects. Australian Institute of Criminology (2010, 21) data indicates that 55 per cent of male police detainees, and 74 per cent of female police detainees were on some form of government benefit at the time of their detention. Furthermore, the same report indicates that for female police detainees, the second highest form of financial assistance came via family and friends. In short, less than 20 percent of females had full time employment at the time of their arrest, leaving the rest with little to no income stream from employment.

The situation is further exacerbated when one considers the long term unemployment rate of offenders. Cameron (2001, 3) states that while long-term unemployment for the overall prison population is 48 per cent, the female inmate long-term unemployment rate is 80 per cent.

Offenders who participate in training and education have lower recidivism rates than offender’s who do not participate. Gordon and Weldon (2003, 203) argue that those offenders who participated in prison education programs had recidivism rates of four per cent. This contrasts to 65 per cent recidivism rate for those who did not participate in prison education programs. The Australian Institute of Criminology (2008, no.65) states that a Queensland study identified a nine per cent recidivism rate improvement of offenders who undertook vocational education and training in prison. While the statistics vary significantly, the trend is clear. The further an individual is prepared to further their education, the lower their recidivism is likely to be.

Offenders benefit from training and education from improvements to cognitive functioning and job prospects. Conley (2008, 84) argues that cognitive strategies, that is the ability of an individual to analytically interpret information, is enhanced the more the individual is prepared to further their education. Higher cognitive functioning is of great importance in relation to individuals adapting to higher education and the workplace.
Another benefit for offenders furthering their training and education is the disciplinary nature of education. Stacey (1998, 60) argues that education is not only learning institution, but also a socialising institution. Skills that an individual is exposed to in an educational setting include learning to be goal and team orientated, work within parameters of rules, as well as learning socialising skills. These skills learnt in training and education settings are transferable into the job market, and promote stability in ones life.

Offenders benefit from undertaking training and education due to the fact that they will more likely enjoy higher job satisfaction levels than those offenders who do not participate in training and education. Perna (2005, 36) states how the further an individual is prepared to advance their education, the more job satisfaction that they will experience. While under trained and educated individuals will invariably be confined to low paid, low skill employment with little opportunity for advancement, the reverse is applicable to trained and educated individuals.

Poor educational attainment coupled with poor employment prospects impact on an offender’s mental health. Australian Institute of Criminology (2010, 23) data indicates that 36 per cent of male police detainees, and 53% of female police detainees reported either being diagnosed with a mental illness, or being treated for a mental illness. Piccone (2006, 240) describes how 31 per cent of male offenders in prison present symptoms of depression, while 25 per cent suffer major depression. Williams et al (2008, 26) describes how many offenders with mental health issues may have a strained relations with their families and friends. This may leave them alone coping with factors that may include inadequate employment and housing, money management issues, as well as medication management.

Offenders benefit from training and education from improvements to their mental health. Ellis et. al (2008, 212) describes how offender’s who participate in education programs illustrate positive psychological traits that include self reliance, autonomy and independence.
As an offender prepares themself to step back into his or her community, they search within for a renewed sense of self image and a plan to stay clear of criminal behaviour. It has been implied that offenders returning to the community unprepared and uneducated results in bitter individuals that could be a further threat to public safety and increase recidivism rates which are costly.

The correlation between offenders and the need for vocational training and education is a well established principle. Jovanic (2011, 79) describes how the 1872 London congress of the International Commission on Criminal Justice and Penal Institutions, met for the first time to discuss the need for offender education. Jovanic (2011, 79) continues by describing how the organisation 1885 Rome congress identified literacy and numeracy skills as being critical for offender’s release back into the community. While the first of these congresses were 139 years ago, the principle of the benefits of educating offenders is as relevant today as it was then.

A factor that inhibits offender training and education are current attitudes within society and government that dictate allocations of resources for correctional departments. Ellis et al. (2008, 203) argue that for correctional departments in Australia and overseas, custody and security represent the lion share of budgetary allocation. They further argue that irrespective of where an offender does custody, there will always be the issue of security risk versus education. However, this argument can equally be made of offenders under community supervision orders who wish to undertake training and education. While there is no escaping the nature of work that corrective departments are engaged in, strategies identify risk could easily be devised to minimise negative situations.
One factor that will determine an offender’s recidivism is the motivation for the offender to change. Howerton et al (2011, 443-444) argued that analysis of former offenders indicated that their decision to change was a significant factor in them not re-offending. Offenders with no motivation had fatalistic and despondent attitudes towards their criminality, whereas motivated offenders were able to identify and make sense of their criminality. However, Howerton et al (2011, 443) argues that for some offender’s, the motivation to change may need to include the severing of negative social bonds, as he argues that this may have been a factor in their original offending. Salekin et al (2010, 170) describes offender’s motivation to change as being instrumental in improving an offender’s mental health as they are more focussed on goals and resilient to negative external and social impacts in their lives.

A common factor with offender’s inability to attempt or finish training or education is their lack of confidence in their ability. Cameron (2001, 4) states that many offenders identify the need to undertake some form of vocational training and education if they are to successfully reintegrate back into society. However, Howerton et al (2009, 440) argues that for many offenders, their inability to integrate into society has left them psychologically pre-conditioned to failure.

Rose et al (2010, 302) examined attitudes of offenders doing university in prison and found that anxiety and low self esteem (among other factors) were significant reasons as to why they did not finish their education prior to offending. Vigorita (2003, 407) goes further and described how for some offenders, their major anxiety was related to merely fitting into the educational setting.

Since 1 July 2010 Queensland Probation & Parole has had an opportunity to offer vocational courses out of the custodial environment to effectively reinforce and support offenders with a Pathway to return to the educational setting hence progressing personal development and employment opportunities in their communities.
For vocational training and education to benefit the offender, it is important for it to be tailored and focused on the needs of the offender. An example of this is the needs surrounding female offenders. It is argued that issues surrounding female offenders are compounded by issues that can include being a single parent, family rejection, history of physical and or sexual abuse, as well as a high prevalence of mental health issues.

For vocational training and education to benefit the offender, it is important for it to be tailored and focused on the needs of the offender. An example of this is the needs surrounding female offenders. Williams et al. (2008, 25) argues that issues surrounding female offenders are compounded by other issues that can include being a single parent, family rejection, history of physical and or sexual abuse, as well as a high prevalence of mental health issues.

A female offender’s history of physical and sexual abuse is an issue that will require training and education programs to be specifically tailored towards them for optimal effectiveness. According to Ellis (2008, 202), trainers and educators will need to present their programs in a manner that is inclusive, fair and consistent. Patience in explaining rules and expectations as well as active listening skills are also stressed. Furthermore, offenders need to also be encouraged to make their own decisions and be responsible for the outcome.

Another factor that needs to be considered with the targeting of offender training and education is that of its perceived benefits to the offender. For training and education classes that cater only for offenders, a common complaint is that the programs are not challenging and have questionable educational benefit. Rose et al (2010, 303) describing a prison training and education program, stated that a complaint from offender’s was that it appeared that as long as the offender turned up to class they would pass. Furthermore, offenders also complained of educators that were not engaged in the class and programs that treated them as idiots. Rose et al (2010, 203) continues by describing how offenders positive comments of education centred around issues of relevance, benefits and the professionalism of the program and teaching staff.
However, just as important as tailoring the vocational training and education to the offenders needs, is the importance of tailoring training and education to the local needs. Cameron (2003, 4) describes how training and education offered to offenders needs to be relevant to employment opportunities that exist in the location that the offender lives and is likely to employed in. An example of this is for offenders in areas with high tourism, hospitality courses would be the focus. Likewise, vocational training in rural areas would focus on agriculture and forestry.

It should also be emphasised that in many cases, the course qualification chosen by the offender becomes less important. The development of self-esteem, a feeling of inclusiveness and self-worth is fostered during the educational experience which the offender will carry as he develops a future. The educational experience brings more than the piece of paper presented for competency of the module; it delivers a big ‘you can do it’ stamp of approval.

Preparing offenders for employment through vocational training and education alone may not be enough to get them into the employment market. Vischer et al (2005, 296) describes how offenders, especially those who have been incarcerated, may have significant issues that inhibit their ability to find employment. These may include lack of recent employment experience, being excluded from certain types of employment, as well as the potential to weaken social connections that may lead to employment. Visher et al (2005, 296) continues by arguing that offenders who have not been incarcerated, but have criminal records, may face similar barriers when seeking employment.

For many offenders, the employment market is foreign to them. They may lack the knowledge or confidence to find legitimate employment. They may also not be aware of what is acceptable behaviour within the workplace. They may also not be aware of what is acceptable behaviour within the workplace. Queensland Probation & Parole Pathways pilot has been able to deliver courses which educate and support the offenders how to look for work, enquire about what opportunities for employment there may be, and learn how to conduct themselves in a job interview and in the work place.
Providing offenders with vocational training and education can be the circuit breaker that promotes positive change within their lives. Initiatives such as the Probation and Parole Pathways can provide motivated individuals with discipline and socialising skills, as well as improving cognitive functioning. All this while improving their employability that can be the springboard to financial, emotional, and social stability. Old habits often die hard. But teaching individuals positive alternatives can provide life altering changes.

Delivering vocational training and education through Probation and Parole Pathways will decrease recidivism rates which will bring about an overall increase in community safety.
Reference list


