



ACEVic and Adult Learning Australia

Submission to:

Inquiry into Victoria's criminal justice system

September 2021

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About us

ACEVic

ACEVic is the Victorian peak policy, advocacy, and information body for the Adult Community Education (ACE) sector, representing Learn Local (LL) providers. ACEVic's purpose is to advocate for and support our members to provide high-quality, innovative, and responsive adult education programs that improve the educational, economic, and social prosperity of individuals and communities.

ACEVic is proud to represent and support community-based and managed ACE providers, delivering education and training to promote engagement and pathways for learners. ACEVic works to ensure Adult and Community Education is accessible to all Victorians. We are committed to increasing levels of educational attainment throughout Victoria. Our work with LL providers is undertaken with respect and integrity, supporting providers in the delivery of quality and innovative community-based education.

Adult Learning Australia

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) has been in operation for more than 61 years and is the largest national peak body for adult learning and community education in Australia. ALA exists to provide leadership and professional development that advances quality services for all adult learners.

ALA is a not-for-profit entity with both organisational and individual members in all states and territories. ALA's members reflect the diversity of adult learning and community education, including community learning centres, community colleges, neighbourhood houses, Aboriginal training and skills organisations, TAFEs and other adult education institutions.

ALA is a trusted long-term leader in the field of adult learning and community education. We believe in the power and potential of adult learning and community education to transform lives and to effect both social and economic change. ALA values and promotes the benefits of learning in all of its forms, and is an active advocate in state, territory, national and international communities.

ALA's vision is for equitable access to learning for all Australians to support social cohesion and economic prosperity.

Terms of reference

The Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System will consider and report on various issues associated with the operation of Victoria's justice system, including, but not limited to:

- (1) an analysis of factors influencing Victoria's growing remand and prison populations;
- (2) strategies to reduce rates of criminal recidivism;
- (3) an examination of how to ensure that judges and magistrates have appropriate knowledge and expertise when sentencing and dealing with offenders, including an understanding of recidivism and the causes of crime; and
- (4) the consideration of judicial appointment processes in other jurisdictions, specifically noting the particular skill-set necessary for judges and magistrates overseeing specialist courts.

Our focus

The focus of this submission is on **(2) strategies to reduce rates of criminal recidivism.**

ACE organisations can help to reduce recidivism by supporting incarcerated adults to build literacy, numeracy digital and employability skills through non-accredited education programs.

ACE organisations can support offenders exiting the criminal justice system, as well as those on parole or community corrections orders through targeted and supported education and training programs.

Non-accredited training in prisons can be provided by ACE organisations, working alongside TAFE in the provision of accredited training.

Outside of prison, ACE organisations, including Learn Local providers funded by the Department of Education and Training via the Adult and Community Further Education (ACFE) Board, can offer a range of tailored pre-accredited programs for prisoners exiting the system or who are on parole or serving community corrections orders.

Recommendations

- Increase the awareness of and access to ACFE funded non-accredited training post release and for adults on community corrections orders
- Increase the provision of non-accredited training by ACE providers within prisons to support language, literacy, numeracy, digital and employability (LLNDE) skill development to aid completion of accredited training and career pathways
- Strengthen collaborative partnerships between TAFE, ACE organisations and DJCS to aid the co-design of pathway programs and increase referrals between agencies, including learner/client centred triaging to identify the most appropriate support options
- Co-design pathway programs with DJCS and ACE organisations to support delivery of community-based programs for learners who have exited prison, are on parole or serving community corrections orders
- Increase access to non-accredited pathway programs to help learners build confidence, resilience and determine their own lifestyle and career options
- Increase awareness of and referral into the various support to employment programs including Reconnect to assist participants who have exited prison to overcome barriers to participation in education, training and employment
- Support successful transition by providing advice and referrals to ACE organisations pre-release, release and post-release
- Adopt a whole of government approach by sharing resources and referral pathways, and supporting common client models between departments such as DET, DJCS and DFFH to offer holistic support for people exiting the criminal justice system, on parole and serving community corrections – consideration should also be given to removing the exclusion of prison cohorts in ACFE funded pre-accredited¹ training
- Share data and information between service providers through Collaborative Practice Frameworks to ensure that learners/clients are not required to continually retell their story, participate in repeated assessments, and so they can transfer education outcomes to other environments
- Integrate all education programs provided by TAFE and ACE in prisons to support sentence and education plans more holistically
- Provide specialised training for ACE educators to effectively support people within and external to the criminal justice system, including professional development to

¹ Pre-accredited programs are non-accredited, short modular courses that are primarily focussed on creating pathways for participants to further education and training or employment funded by the Victorian Government.

understand best practice in supporting this highly vulnerable cohort, including criminogenic considerations

- Increase the number of ACE organisations working with DJCS, share best practice and successful programs across the sector
- Implement nationally consistent testing of prisoners' LLNDE skills including early detection of specific learning difficulties

Adult and Community Education

The Adult Community Education (ACE) sector in Victoria is the largest and oldest in Australia. ACE organisations are governed by voluntary committees of management whose members are drawn from the local community. They offer programs ranging from basic adult education through to diploma level qualifications as well as pre-employment programs.

ACE organisations are a diverse group that includes community centres, community learning centres, community colleges and neighbourhood houses. They also include training centres managed by large not-for-profit organisations such as Yooralla, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Jesuit Social Services and Melbourne City Mission, the Centre for Adult Education and a number of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist providers such as Adult Multicultural Education Services and Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd.

Learn Local providers

In Victoria, the ACFE Board – a statutory authority under the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 – funds a network of ACE organisations.² Known as registered Learn Local providers, these organisations deliver pre-accredited education and training programs that target people with limited prior access to education.

Pre-accredited programs are short modular courses that are primarily focused on creating pathways for participants to further education and training or employment. The programs are innovative and flexible and can be designed to meet the learning needs of specific learner cohorts. They currently target:

- women seeking to re-enter the workforce or who have experienced or are experiencing family violence
- early school leavers, both mature and youth
- low skilled and vulnerable workers
- Indigenous people
- unemployed and underemployed people
- people from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds

² Not all ACE organisations in Victoria deliver ACFE funded Learn Local programs.

- disengaged young people
- people with a disability.

There are 250 Learn Local providers in Victoria. About 30% of LL providers are also Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) delivering a range of accredited training programs. Not all Victorian ACE organisations are Learn Local providers and the sector also has an active fee-for-service delivery model alongside other government funded ACE programs.^{3 4}

ACE programs

ACE programs embrace the principles of best practice delivery of learning programs to 'difficult to reach cohorts', including:

- non-formal learning opportunities alongside formal learning
- pathways to further education, training, and employment, including TAFE and LL RTOS
- pathways to employment
- welcoming and accepting learning environments
- flexible and learner-focused andragogy
- innovative programs designed in response to local needs
- interpersonal connections to build better and stronger communities
- awareness of diversity and promotion of connected communities
- essential training in adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills
- vocational pathway programs and employability skill development

In 2018, Victorian Government-funded ACE training engaged people who otherwise could be excluded from the education system:

- 980 disengaged young people
- 7,550 people without Year 12, Certificate II, or higher
- 810 low-skilled and vulnerable workers; and
- 11,040 unemployed people
- 580 Koorie people
- 7,970 people with a disability; and
- 14,090 people of culturally and linguistically diverse background.⁵

ACE providers have a long history of successfully supporting learners to engage in further education and training.

- 57% of all pre-accredited learners engage in further education.

³ Source: Adult Learning Australia. (2020). ACE Environmental Scan. <https://ala.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Australian-ACE-Report-2020.pdf>

⁴ Source: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/training/providers/learnlocal/Pages/funding.aspx>

⁵ The Future of Adult and Community Education in Victorian 2020-2025 Ministerial Statement

- 29% of all learners transition into or commence an accredited course.
- 23% of all learners successfully attain an accredited qualification⁶.

Pre-accredited learners who transition to accredited training are much more likely to attain their qualifications compared to the average Victorian VET student. Of the 29% of pre-accredited learners who transition into accredited training, 64% directly attain a qualification with a further 14% indirectly attaining a qualification. In comparison, the average Victorian VET completion rate is 47.3%. This result is striking given that 90% of pre-accredited learners are experiencing multiple instances of disadvantage.⁷

Rising rates of incarceration and recidivism

Between 2010 and 2020, the Victorian prisoner population increased by 58%.^{8,9} Over the same period, there were also significant increases in:

- female prisoner numbers (rising 29%)
- prisoners aged 50 and over (rising 73%)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners (rising 148%)
- prisoners who had no previously served a prison sentence (rising 51%)

Between 2017 and 2018, 44% of prisoners released returned to prison within two years (to 2019–20). The proportion of prisoners who returned to corrective services, which includes those placed on community orders, was 55%.¹⁰ Table 2 shows national data for comparative purposes.

Table 2: % prisoners released during 2017–18 who returned to prison or corrective services within 2 years¹¹

Jurisdiction	% of prisoners returning to prison	% of prisoners returning to corrective services
Northern Territory	60.8%	63.7%
New South Wales	49.9%	56.1%
Tasmania	47.1%	56.6%

⁶ Participation, training outcomes and patterns in the Victorian pre-accredited sector. Deloitte Access Economics 2017

⁷ *Future Opportunities for Adult Learners in Victoria. Pathways to Participation and Jobs Discussion Paper* (2018) Department of Education and Training, Melbourne.

⁸ Source: Corrections Victoria – <https://www.corrections.vic.gov.au/prisons/prisoner-and-offender-statistics>

⁹ Note: This increase was largely attributed to an increase in prisoners on remand, representing 35% of all prisoners.

¹⁰ Source: Sentencing Advisory Council, Released Prisoners returning to prison – <https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sentencing-statistics/released-prisoners-returning-to-prison>

¹¹ Source: Australian Productivity Commission, Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, [Report on Government Services 2021, Part C, Table CA.4](#) (2021).

Queensland	45.3%	57.5%
Victoria	44.2%	54.8%
Australian Capital Territory	37.1%	63.4%
Western Australia	36.6%	44.4%
South Australia	34.8%	42.3%
Australia	46.0%	54.9%

The impact of education on recidivism

Research shows that participation in education reduces recidivism. For example, research published in 2016 based on a longitudinal dataset of prisoners in Western Australia¹² concluded that despite some dataset issues:

There is sufficient ... data to ... confirm the usefulness of a prison study in reducing reoffending and improving post-release outcomes. Specifically:

- ex-prisoners who have upskilled in prison are less likely to commit more serious offences over time;
- the more classes prisoners successfully complete, the less likely they are to reoffend; and
- ex-prisoners who successfully complete classes in prison are more likely to remain in the community for longer.

The study also found that the more classes an individual *successfully completed* in prison, the less time they spend on unemployment benefits.

Another WA study in 2014¹³, showed that prisoners aged 26–40 years, male, metropolitan, non-Indigenous and with longer prison terms were more likely to engage in learning programs. Finding solutions that support broader prisoner engagement in education, particularly female and Indigenous cohorts, is desirable as well as strategies that support the completion of education and training programs, in order to reduce recidivism rates.

¹² Giles, M. (2016). Study in prison reduced recidivism and welfare dependence: A case study from Western Australia 2005–2010 – <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi514>

¹³ Giles M. & Whale J. (2013). Prisoner Education and Training, and Other Characteristics: Western Australia, July 2005 to June 2010, Phase 1 Report. Joondalup, WA: Centre for Innovative Practice, Edith Cowan University

Prisoners and disadvantage

Prisoners are among the most educationally disadvantaged people in Australia. In 2003, the Review of Education and Training Provision in Victorian Prisons¹⁴ identified that:

- prisoners were more significantly disadvantaged – educationally, vocationally, socially – than the general community and had complex needs that impacted on their capacity to participate successfully in education
- prisoners’ attitudes to education impacted successful outcomes
- skills of educators needed to be linked to the identified needs of prisoners and corrections.

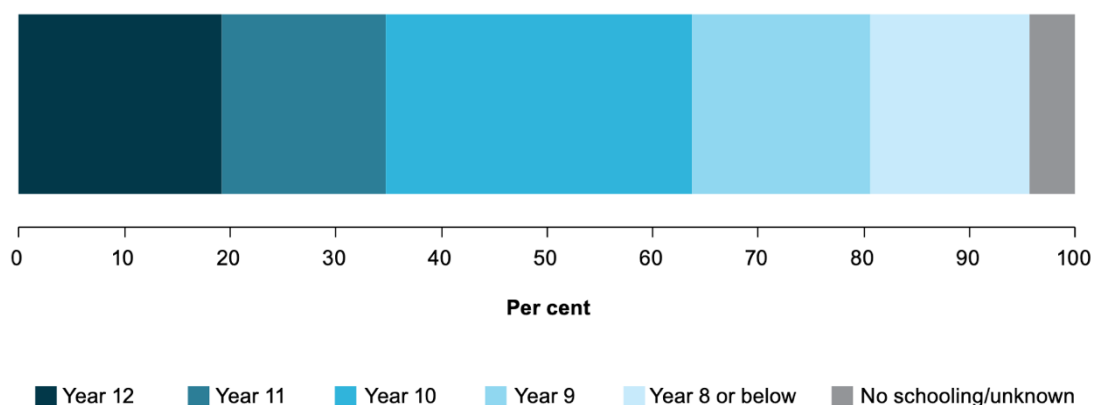
The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report: *The Health of Australia’s Prisoners (2018)*¹⁵ confirmed that many adults entering prison came from severely disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Report further identified that 33% or 1 in 3 prison entrants only completed schooling to Year 9 or under.

‘People in prison have lower levels of educational attainment and higher levels of learning difficulties and learning disabilities than people in the general community (AIHW 2015; Kendall & Hopkins 2019; Skues et al. 2019).

‘Lower levels of educational attainment are associated with poorer employment opportunities and outcomes, and unemployment is a risk factor for incarceration and for reoffending post-release (Baldry et al. 2018).’

Figure 1: Prison entrants, highest level of schooling completed, 2018 (%)



Notes: Excludes NSW.

¹⁴ Source: Review of Education and Training Provision in Victorian Prisons (2003) https://files.corrections.vic.gov.au/2021-06/review_education_training_provision_in_victorian_prisons_1%2059smallp.pdf

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008). The Health of Australia’s Prisoners – <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/2e92f007-453d-48a1-9c6b-4c9531cf0371/aihw-phe-246.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

Data from Corrections Victoria (2018) indicated that 88% of prisoners had not completed secondary school education, and just 5.8% had completed secondary, trade/technical or tertiary education.

Access to education in prison

Prison education in Victoria is currently outsourced to TAFE and all prisoners, including those on protection or in management units, have access to state and nationally accredited education and training programs (www.corrections.vic.gov.au).

Some non-accredited ACE programs are funded separately by Corrections Victoria and delivered inside Victorian prisons but data on the outcomes of these programs is limited and is independent of data reported on VET outcomes.

In 2015, the Victorian Government reported that 'only 40 per cent of prisoners have the sufficient literacy and numeracy skills they needed to be able to cope independently in the workforce'¹⁶. The Victorian Corrections Minister said at the time that 'prisoners would be offered numerous vocational programs by several training providers, once they completed the academic tests.

However, according to Australasian Corrections Education Association's (2021) submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (Committee) inquiry into and report on adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in Australia:

There is no consistent practice to record the entry and exit language, literacy, numeracy, digital and employability skills of adult and youth offenders across Australian jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction uses different entry assessment methodologies and interpretation of offender entry levels or track improvement on these levels upon release or transition to community.

This results in an opaque capacity to analyse national trends in the effectiveness of LLNDE capability development with prison or youth justice education programs.

In order to address low levels of literacy in prisons and identify the impact of VET programs in this area, there must be nationally consistent testing of prisoners' foundation skills, including a process for early detection of specific learning difficulties.

Adults with low levels of prior education and low language, literacy, numeracy, employability and digital (LLNDE) skills are often unsuccessful in accredited training.

¹⁶ ABC online. (2015). Victorian prisoners to be tested for literacy and numeracy – <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-09/victorian-prisoners-to-be-tested-for-literacy-and-numeracy/6923000>

Successful outcomes are often undermined by the lack of flexibility in the VET system.¹⁷ The two-course rule, in particular, is ‘a structural impediment for high needs learners’.¹⁸

Research tells us that literacy is developed through social participation and that low levels of literacy are often intergenerational and linked with entrenched disadvantage. Adults with low literacy are frequently the products of poor formal schooling, poverty, family dysfunction and a myriad of other issues that can impede their ability to learn. In addition, offenders are more likely to have one or more learning difficulties than the general population – conservatively over 50% of the cohort.¹⁹

A better approach for adults with very low literacy is purposeful, learner-centred, non-formal adult literacy programs that address the issues and barriers from a holistic perspective and embrace an intergenerational approach, where appropriate.

Non-accredited pathway programs that build LLNDE skills and confidence support completion rates in accredited training. A holistic approach to education and training in prisons would include both non-accredited ACE programs that build LLNDE skills in addition to accredited qualifications offered by TAFE.

While the correlation between successful rehabilitation and employment is clear, it is difficult for prisoners who have low levels of language, literacy, numeracy, digital and employability (LLNDE) skills, unmanaged learning difficulty and associated conditions and poor performance at school to achieve successful outcomes in vocational training programs without intensive support.

The AIHW Report (2018) identified that upon release, around 17% (1 in 6) had *completed* a qualification in prison, and a further 8% indicated they had started or continued some form of qualification while in prison.

Table 1 below is a snapshot of prison education and training provision according to the Report on Government Services 2020 Corrective Services.²⁰

Table 1: Prisoner education and training (% of eligible prisoners)

Type	NSW	VIC	Qld	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	AUST
Pre-certificate Level 1 courses	1.3	1.5	16.3	8.2	29.0	9.9	38.3	–	8.0

¹⁷ Lamb et al (2018). Improving participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners – <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/improving-participation-and-success-in-vet-for-disadvantaged-learners>

¹⁸ NH Vic & ALA (2019). Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Discussion paper – <https://ala.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FOAL-Response-Final1.pdf>

¹⁹ Moore, E et al (2016) Adult ADHD Among NSW Prisoners: Prevalence and Psychiatric Comorbidity. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, vol 20(11)

²⁰ RoGS (2020) Corrective Service – <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/justice/corrective-services>

Secondary school education	8.5	0.7	5.0	–	–	–	12.0	–	3.6
Vocational Education and Training	16.9	37.8	15.6	20.5	39.7	18.2	59.4	31.5	24.9
Higher education	0.1	0.9	6.2	1.5	–	0.2	1.9	1.2	1.5
TOTAL	22.9	39.5	38.2	29.7	68.6	24.8	70.8	32.7	35.1

According to this data, in Victoria just 1.5% of the 39.5% of prisoners in education and training programs are in Pre-certificate Level 1 courses, compared with, for example, the ACT (38.3%) and SA (29%).²¹ This significant gap in Pre-certificate courses in Victoria could be filled by non-accredited LLNDE programs delivered by ACE organisations.

According to the Victorian Ombudsman’s Investigation into the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Prisoners in Victoria (2015)²²:

Offering prisoners the opportunity to train or retrain is a valuable use of time and resources, however our prisons regularly fail to meet benchmarks for the education and training they have committed to.

Learning programs in Victoria are also not linked with ‘specific post release job opportunities.’²³

In collaboration with the Department of Justice and Community Safety, ACE organisations can not only deliver non-accredited programs in prison but can also link ex-offenders with community service providers. Programs such as the Skills First Reconnect Program, Jobs Victoria Employment Services (JVES) and other pre-employment programs support the transition into further education and employment.

Access to education outside prison

There are strong parallels between ACE outcomes and the social and economic benefits of improving access to education and training as well as reducing rates of recidivism. The ACFE Board Strategy *Skills for Study, Work and Life 2020–2025* noted that ‘Adult community and further education strengthens Victorian communities. It offers economic benefits through greater workforce participation, reduced welfare costs and improved mental health; and it contributes social benefits by strengthening the ability of all Victorians to participate fully as members of the community’²⁴

²¹ The collection method for this data varies across jurisdictions. This data also doesn’t include programs delivered by community providers to people corrections orders or community education programs following parole requirements.

²² Victorian Ombudsman’s Investigation into the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Prisoners in Victoria (2015). https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/file_uploads/Tabling_copy_VO_Parliamentary_Report_Prisons_Sep_2015_DnFk9ykH.pdf

²³ UNSW, Deakin University, Edith Cowan University. (2016). Adult Prisoner Participation in Education Training and Employment in Australia, 2008–2015. https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Audit_prisoner_participation_in_industries_and_education_20082015_FINAL.pdf

²⁴ Adult, Community and Further Education Board Strategy 2020-2025 Skills for Study, Work and Life

The Victorian ACE sector and Learn Local providers in particular, have been positively acknowledged by the Victorian Government for the 'important role they play in the Victorian education and training landscape' (ACE sector statement, 2019).

Currently the ACFE Board is working within a strategic framework articulated in The ACFE Board Strategy *Skills for Study, Work and Life 2020–2025* and in line with *The Future of Adult and Community Education in Victoria 2020–2025* Ministerial Statement, which recognises the integral role ACE plays within the post-secondary education system and its role in providing skills for work, further education and life. Through the strategy, the ACFE Board has renewed its commitment to supporting the ACE sector to lead literacy, numeracy, English language, employability and digital skills education and training for adult learners in Victoria.

A key aim of the Ministerial Statement is to unite the post-secondary education system. This includes the development of partnerships between LL providers and TAFE. Such collaboration increases learner pathways from ACE to TAFE. It also supports TAFE students to course complete as learners simultaneously engage in pre-accredited literacy, numeracy employability and digital skills support programs.

Strengthening pathways between ACE providers, TAFE and DJCS will benefit people exiting prison. It will assist them to access additional support from ACE providers while completing TAFE qualifications commenced in prison. It will also help them access support and skill development from pre-accredited LLNDE programs.

Skills First Reconnect Program

Post release from prison, individualised wraparound support to access education, training and employment is available through the Reconnect program. The Reconnect program, funded by the Department of Education and Training is delivered by some TAFE and LL RTOs who hold a Skills First Funding contract. The program supports Victorians experiencing disadvantage and assists participants to overcome barriers preventing them from engaging in education, training and employment. The Reconnect program offers individualised mentoring and case management support into further study or employment pathways.

The Reconnect program is intended to improve a person's chance of breaking the cycle of disadvantage by creating equity, improving access and increasing choice in career and life pathways through education and training. Increasing advice and referrals to Reconnect Programs and ACE providers at the critical transition stages of pre-release, release and post release from prison will increase support options and accessibility to participation in education, training and employment.

The Victorian Ombudsman identified the need for 'pre- and post-release services and support for a range of people exiting prison. Adult and community education providers offer flexible and supportive placed based education and training opportunities, as well as a range of community support services within local communities. Linking people on

parole, serving community corrections orders and exiting prison to adult and community education providers, including into the Reconnect program, will broaden their support networks as well as provide critical education and pre-employment opportunities within their local communities.

The 2021 contracts issued to Reconnect providers allowed for up to around 50 registrations for the year per provider over four to five local government areas. The demand and need for this program is far in excess of this level of funding for all disadvantaged learners let alone allowing for offenders to participate.

ACE case studies

A number of Victorian ACE organisations have forged robust relationships with DJCS in the provision of tailored pre-accredited programs for learners on parole and serving community corrections orders. These programs can be reproduced across the state in other ACE organisations broadening the scope of delivery. Working in collaboration with DJCS, The Centre for Continuing Education in Wangaratta has developed pre-accredited programs for learners who have exited the criminal justice system or are on corrections orders.

I am

The *I AM* pre-accredited program incorporates a strength-based approach to support learners to develop greater self-awareness, identify and explore their strengths, values and beliefs and guide them to create new life choices, pathways and goals.

Participants have valued the opportunity to engage in pre-accredited training to help build their confidence and become autonomous and self-directed learners prior to transitioning to further education, training and employment.

"I became more self-aware and it was good to have the activities to reflect and remind me. I have gained a lot from this. I AM has allowed for me to make some positive changes"

"I got excited about completing something, I didn't think I could"

"I gained more empathy and understanding different perspective"

"Learned the value of reflection and being less negative, it has allowed me to open up more about where I am at, more comfortable talking about me"

"I am feeling good after completing this course and have achieved something"

"This course is going to change people's individual worlds – people will be involved when it is about them. I would recommend to others, especially those who feel like they've been beaten down in life. This course has done wonders for me"

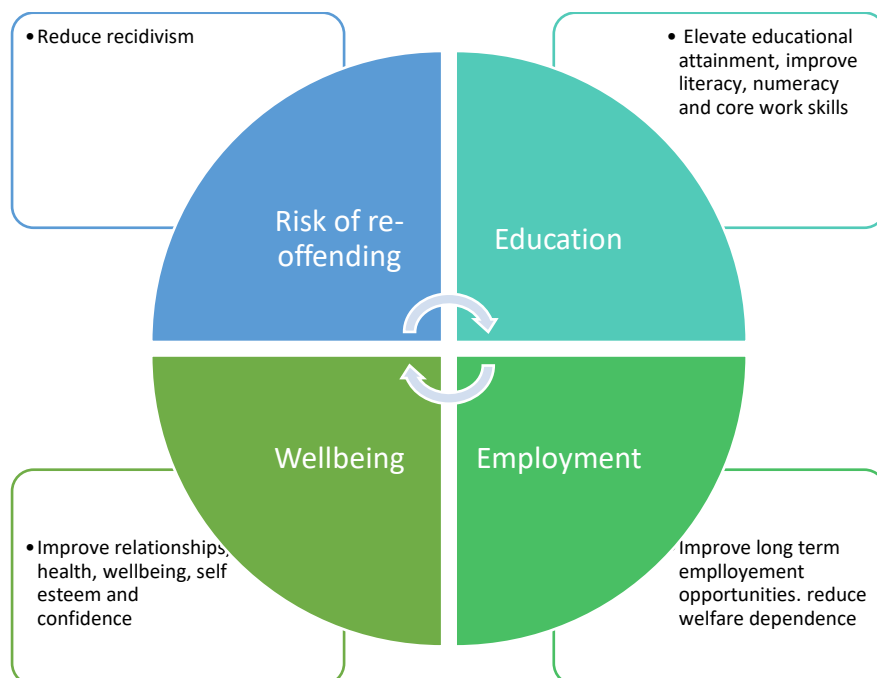
"I am now looking to do a RSA course this month to get into paid work, I have learnt that I am responsible for my own choices"

“After doing I AM I now feel I am in a position where I am brave enough to deal with my mental health issues and my DJCS case manager has made me a referral. I feel pretty confident about going forward”

Finding strengths

The Centre for Continuing Education’s *Finding Strengths* program was developed in conjunction with DJCS by its team of clinicians involved in the project at the time. It is being rolled out across the Hume region for people on parole or serving community corrections orders, as well as other vulnerable learners.

The program uses evidence-based testing and assessment to identify learning difficulties for offenders on parole or community corrections orders. The use of strength-based educational strategies promotes self-efficacy and self-determination and moves learners towards a pathway of employment to reduce recidivism.



The *Finding Strengths* program was piloted in 2020 and is continuing through JVES funding. It is a prime example of how education, training and support options available through ACE can help reduce recidivism. Using a collaborative practice model, the ACE provider has linked educators, clinicians, industry liaison officers, DJCS case managers, community mentors and learning engagement officers to provide a holistic wrap around support service with educational and employment goals.

Read along Dads

Read Along Dads and other literacy programs are administered through the Friends of Castlemaine Library (FOCAL) and funded Pip Wisdom Community Corrections grants and the Victorian Legal Services Board.

This program has been run in the Loddon Prison Precinct (including Middleton) and Tarrengower Prison.

The program supports the men to keep in touch with their children while they are separated. They also help the children through this difficult time - and promote the development of literacy skills.

Creative Kindness

TaskForce Agency is an ACE RTO that offers a range of education, training and support programs for youth, adults and families in Southeast Melbourne. This includes pre-accredited training programs for youth and adult Corrections Victoria clients to assist learners to build confidence, resilience and prepare them for further engagement in education, training and employment. Their Corrections Creative Kindness project for people serving community corrections orders has been highly successful in supporting participants through engagement, confidence and resilience building exercises delivered within a creative framework.

“Indeed, I enjoy every moment of the group work and great communication conducted from all of us, it challenged me and made me feel welcome, inspired and happy & yes I will be participating this work with my grandchild because is fun, thank you for kind and wisdom words you shared with us”

“I really enjoy the flexibility of doing the group via Zoom because there's a bit of structure but it's not as formal and not as confronting as doing it face to face. I've noticed I've become more confident and comfortable in sharing as compared to when I first started. I really enjoy your nonbiased and respectful nature and you hardly give off any negative vibes and that's really cool come to think of it. In summary It's always nice to learn new things about oneself through the therapy that art has to offer.”

Special education needs

Felicity Williams, CEO of The Centre for Continuing Education, Wangaratta and International Specialised Skills Institute Fellow (ISSI) has researched the need for support options for learners with learning difficulties within the adult and community education system, with a particular focus of learners within and who have exited the criminal justice system.

“Undiagnosed learning difficulties (specifically ADHD or dyslexia) have been found through Australian and international research studies to be prevalent in over 50% of the prison

population. Research in the UK found 53% of criminal offenders at Chelmsford Prison²⁵ were dyslexic. Similarly, research has found a disproportionately high prevalence of individuals with ADHD within the criminal justice system, with prevalence rates of between 20 and 30%. In an Australian study²⁶ of adult ADHD among NSW prisoners, the researchers concluded that 35% of the prisoner sample screened positive for ADHD and upon further diagnostic assessment, found 17% of those met criteria for adult ADHD (general population 2-3%)²⁷

“Our sector does not support deployment of highly qualified and trained staff with expertise to help these learners to manage their condition and achieve success through adult education. It is also of concern that around 50% of the justice cohort may have a learning difficulty that has remained unmanaged and provides further impediments to these individuals being able to comply and cope with the justice system. It is clear that the education system has failed these individuals as children and they are now presenting as adults with ongoing structural barriers to successful educational attainment”²⁸

Through her ISSI research in Australia, UK and the European Union, Felicity has identified the need for policy reform along with sufficient resourcing for the ACE sector to support learners with Special Education Needs (SEN) such as dyslexia and ADHD to assist them to achieve transformational success through education and training programs. Felicity highlights the need for early assessment for special learning needs and learning difficulties and specialised training for staff in assessing for SEN within DJCS and the VET and ACE sector, along with appropriate teaching strategies to meet the needs of these learners.

“Early assessment of adults for special learning needs and learning difficulties must occur as soon as possible. With the knowledge that learning difficulties are more prevalent within justice cohorts, unemployed and low socio-economic situation, the opportunity to undertake an assessment could occur wherever the person first comes in contact with a relevant agency. With training in the use of a rapid assessment tool, frontline staff (e.g. in the police station, Community Corrections, community health, enrolment office) could easily undertake a quick assessment to ascertain whether a learning difficulty could be present. Through collaborative practice relationships, this information must then be shared with agencies as appropriate, including with a suitable adult education provider for further attention and deeper assessment”²⁹.

²⁵ Hewitt-Main, J (2012) Dyslexia Behind Bars. Mentoring 4U, UK

²⁶ Moore, E et al (2016) Adult ADHD Among NSW Prisoners: Prevalence and Psychiatric Comorbidity. Journal of Attention Disorders, Vol 20(11) 958-967.

²⁷ Williams, F (2020) Specialised education needs is everyone’s business. An International; Specialised Skills Institute Fellowship

²⁸ Williams, F (2020) Specialised education needs is everyone’s business. An International; Specialised Skills Institute Fellowship

²⁹ Williams, F (2020) Specialised education needs is everyone’s business. An International; Specialised Skills Institute Fellowship

Conclusion

Adult and community education in Victoria plays an integral role within the post-secondary education system. Increasingly there are strong partnerships between ACE and TAFE. These connections can be strengthened including in the provision of non-accredited training in prisons by ACE providers. The language, literacy, numeracy, digital and employability programs offered by ACE can support learners undertaking accredited programs delivered by TAFE in prisons.

Some ACE providers are already working collaboratively with the DJCS in the provision of pre-accredited training for people on parole and serving community corrections orders. There is enormous potential for these types of partnerships to be extended throughout the state.

To lower rates of recidivism, a whole of government, common client approach is recommended to enhance participation in education and training for people in prison, post release, on parole and serving community corrections orders. Strengthening relationships between government departments such as DET and DJCS will streamline educational and support options, increase referral between agencies and enhance accessibility into pre-accredited, non-accredited and accredited education and training programs increasing successful attainment of employment.

Learners within prison, post release, on parole and serving community corrections orders will benefit from a holistic approach to meet their welfare, educational and employment goals. This includes collaboration with TAFE, ACE providers, DJCS, the Skills First Reconnect Program, community welfare and support agencies.