



# **A Better Future:** Education and Learning in Prison

Carole Petchell

Victorian Skills Authority Fellowship, 2026

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# 01

## Acknowledgements

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### The Awarding Bodies

The Fellow sincerely thanks the Victorian Skills Authority (VSA) for providing funding support for the ISS Institute and for this Fellowship.

The ISS Institute plays a pivotal role in creating value and opportunity, encouraging new thinking and early adoption of ideas and practice by investing in individuals. The overarching aim of the ISS Institute is to support the development of a 'Better Skilled Australia'. The Institute does this via the provision of Fellowships that allow Australians to undertake international skills development and applied research that will positively impact Australian industry and the broader community.

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## **Sponsor - the Victorian Skills Authority**

The Victorian Skills Authority works in partnership with the International Specialised Skills Institute by funding the VET International Practitioner Fellowships. The Fellowship program focuses on developing opportunities within the VET sector to assist in building an Education State in Victoria that produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage. In addition, the program is funded to support the priorities of Skills First, including developing capacity and capability, innovative training practices and increasing teacher quality within the VET sector as well as building industry capability and developing Victoria's current and future workforce.

## **Fellow's Acknowledgements**

There are many people and organisations that have supported this fellowship.

In Australia advice and proposal support was gratefully received from Deborah Westfield, General Manager, Education and Vocational Training, Corrections Victoria, Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS). Bendigo Kangan Institute colleagues and in particular, the Director, Corrections Education Centre, Bendigo Kangan Institute provided unwavering support.

In Scotland, Drew Jardine, Project Manager Scottish Prison Service provided a wealth of experience and background information for the tours into Barlinnie, Low Moss, Shotts and Stirling prisons, Drew arranged access for discussions with education providers and teachers, prison industry officers and with prisoners at each prison.

In England, Michelle Downer, Senior National Lead Manager, New Futures Network hosted a visit to Parkhurst and Albany prisons on the Isle of Wight and together with Samantha Morey provided insight and introductions to the prison General Manager (Governor) and some of his staff, education staff in the work parties/industries at Parkhurst and Albany and extensive information about the Apprenticeship Pathway Project across the larger estate.

Also in England, Asi Panditharatna Executive Director, Employment Services, Forward Trust, the provider of Information and Guidance Advisors (IGA) in numerous prisons in England arranged a meeting inside Aylesbury prison with one of the Advisors and provided an overview of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reporting regime.

Thanks, and acknowledgement to the Victorian Skills Authority (VSA) who made this fellowship possible with their financial support and to the International Specialised Skills Institute (ISSI) whose encouragement and support was instrumental in providing both the impetus and the framework to make this possible.

# 02

## Executive Summary

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The focal point of this fellowship is on education opportunities for incarcerated students to broaden their future employment options. These people are restricted in their learning in numerous ways in Victoria and in the UK: Government funding; security, safety; site prison facilities; and the prison regime within each prison impacts the opportunities offered and the resources and equipment that can be used for education. In addition, incarcerated individuals have no access to any technology that provides internet access.

This fellowship opportunity was used to validate familiar interventions common to Victoria and other jurisdictions, offered in similar or different ways to continuously improve the current delivery and provision of education services in Victorian prisons and aimed to identify and propose innovative and tested options that could be applicable to the Victorian context.

Apprenticeships are a key area of focus of this fellowship. Apprenticeships provide a well-regarded skills-based career path. In both jurisdictions Apprenticeships are comprised of employment-based education and practical skills development. In the community an apprentice has paid employment while learning on the job and studying concurrently.

For many incarcerated students, education provided inside the prison is more accessible than would be for these people when they are at freedom. Classes are structured around their availability, and do not require transport, complex enrolment requirements or fees. Course choices

are limited and restricted with apprenticeships currently not available to prisoners in Victoria. Small group learning and dedicated teaching staff provide vocational and adult basic education programmes to the students, many of whom have communication or cognitive impairments, acquired or traumatic brain injuries or are neurodivergent.

The Apprenticeship Programme in England commenced after legislative changes in 2022 and was initially restricted to incarcerated individuals that were permitted day release from the prison environment. It has been expanded to include closed apprenticeships. Closed Apprenticeships permit employers to choose an apprentice that will commence the apprenticeship while serving their prison sentence and attend the employment location upon release where they will then complete the apprenticeship. These individuals are released from prison with secure jobs. The Ministry of Defence apprentices are also provided with housing for themselves and their families.

There are some key considerations for the Victorian context.

- There is no information, or very limited information shared with the education providers about most incarcerated individuals and their specific needs to guide the design of, and support to, students with learning difficulties, disability or neurodivergence etc.
- As not all incarcerated individuals access education in Victoria, collection of data linked to the specific learning support needs would provide insight about education uptake for

those with cognitive impairments, which classes or courses are accessed and assist in the design of interventions to encourage participation.

- The 2024-2025 Victorian Skills Plan promotes apprentices and trainees as playing a vital role in delivering government priorities and further discloses that occupations in demand will require a growing number of apprentices in carpentry, electrotechnology and plumbing. These employment areas of high demand made available to incarcerated individuals would offer these people the prospect of a better future and would benefit the Victorian economy.
- Applying for an apprenticeship, being interviewed and selected for the position whilst incarcerated would provide secure employment on release supported by education services in prison dedicated to preparing the individual for their new employment role.
- In Victoria, Apprentices and their employers must enter a formal training contract. The contract ends if the apprentice becomes unemployed. When an apprentice is incarcerated, the training contract is suspended or ended. The incarcerated individual cannot then continue their learning while in prison disadvantaging the person and ending their learning path during their period of incarceration.
- Further research could provide aggregated data from the many thousands of learning plans developed offering an opportunity to identify aspirations and the factors that influence aspirations of incarcerated individuals.

In addition to the increased professional knowledge and prisoner/student focussed outcomes, the fellowship afforded a personal concentrated and focussed investigation into a niche area of vocational education, eliciting a broader and deeper understanding of the various perspectives that define the directions taken by different jurisdictions. This learning and development have provided impetus for this Fellow to look forward to enrolling in a research higher degree.

# 03

## Acronyms

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|               |   |             |   |
|---------------|---|-------------|---|
| <b>ACEA</b>   | Australasian Corrections Education Association                        | <b>RoTL</b> | Release on Temporary Licence  |
| <b>AV</b>     | Apprenticeships Victoria  | <b>PLP</b>  | Personal Learning Plan  |
| <b>BKI</b>    | Bendigo Kangan Institute  | <b>SVQ</b>  | Scottish Vocational Qualifications  |
| <b>CV</b>     | Corrections Victoria  | <b>TAFE</b> | Technical and further Education   |
| <b>DJCS</b>   | Department of Justice and Community Safety                            | <b>UK</b>   | United Kingdom (comprising England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) |
| <b>DJSIR</b>  | Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions                      | <b>VAGO</b> | Victorian Auditor General   |
| <b>EVT</b>    | Education and Vocational Training                                     | <b>VBA</b>  | Victorian Building Authority  |
| <b>HMIPS</b>  | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland                    | <b>VC</b>   | Vocational Counsellor   |
| <b>HMP</b>    | His Majesty's Prison  | <b>VET</b>  | Vocational Education and Training   |
| <b>HMPPS</b>  | His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service                            | <b>VRQA</b> | Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority                       |
| <b>IGA</b>    | Information and Guidance counsellor                                   | <b>VSA</b>  | Victorian Skills Authority  |
| <b>IOW</b>    | Isle of Wight   | <b>VTQ</b>  | Vocational Technical Qualifications                                       |
| <b>ISSI</b>   | International Specialised Skills Institute                            |             |   |
| <b>NOMIS</b>  | National Offender Management Information System                       |             |   |
| <b>Ofsted</b> | The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills |             |   |

# 04

## Fellowship Background

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As a TAFE manager at Bendigo Kangan Institute (BKI), the past 12 years have been professionally focussed on education for incarcerated adults in Victoria.

Corrections Victoria manage the contracts that shape the education delivery. The focus of education in Victorian prisons is aimed at improving literacy and numeracy and providing skills and education that links to rehabilitation, and employment on release, together aimed at reducing re-offending.

Education services in Victorian prisons provided by BKI offers a similar student experience as would be provided in a mainstream TAFE campus before the use of online and internet-based learning. Teacher led small group training, face-to-face with classroom, practical and industry-based classes are the norm, with some limited blended learning opportunities. Some education is 'on-the-job' in prison industries and all students receive formal recognition for the completion of units of competency and course completion with Statements of Results and Statements of Attainment as they would in the Australian community.

All the education provided is accredited and taught by qualified teachers, career development services are provided by professionally qualified career counsellors.

Incarcerated students are restricted in their learning in numerous ways. Security, safety,

site prison industry and the regime within each prison impacts the opportunities offered and the resources and equipment that can be used for education. Education opening hours are fitted into the structured day of the prison with medication, prisoner counts, meals, prison staff training and prison staff availability all impacting the teaching timetable. The course choices and allocation of volume are also prescribed. Incarcerated individuals have no access to any technology that provides internet access restricting research opportunities and access to online learning materials, noting that some online learning materials have been repurposed for use within Victorian prisons.

The vocational education areas are, in general, devoted to entry level roles in industries where there are skills gaps for example: engineering, cookery, construction and civil construction and some limited pre-apprenticeship course areas.

The adult basic education teaching focusses on literacy, numeracy, foundation skills and English as an additional language. Computers, some laptops and tablets are available on a closed network.

Therapeutic and creative areas of education, for example music and art are not generally provided as an educational option for inmates. A notable exception is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Arts courses provided for first nations students which aligns with income streams for indigenous art sales through a non-profit organisation 'The Torch'

This fellowship provided an opportunity to validate the current delivery and provision in Victorian prisons, and ideally, to identify and propose innovative and tested options to continuously improve the education provision for men and women in Victorian Prisons.

## 4.1 Focus

The focus of this report will be on rehabilitation and employment/career development of incarcerated people in preparation for their release into the community.

Scotland and England were chosen due to the similarities of both the prison regime structure and the technical and further education (TAFE) system for adults, in addition these jurisdictions all use English for verbal and written communication. In Australia, National Training Qualifications, Vocational Education and Training (VET) aligns readily with vocational education qualifications in the United Kingdom (UK). Specifically, the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ) and Vocational Technical Qualifications in England (VTQ). In addition, the prison estate and prisoner numbers in Scotland are similar to those in Victoria permitting limited alignment to volume and options linked to scale.

Apprenticeships exist in Australia and the UK. There are differences in how these are administered, however the basis is of employment-based education and practical skills development. The apprentice has paid employment while learning on the job and studying concurrently (with time release for study) over an extended period. The apprenticeship is usually for a period of 3 -4 years in Australia and up to 5 years in the UK. In Australia and the UK there is an employment contract between the employer and the apprentice and an additional training agreement with the education provider.

In Australia there are apprenticeships and traineeships, noting that traineeships were not included in this fellowship research. Most apprenticeships are considered 'trades' e.g.

plumbing, carpentry, furniture making, hairdressing, cookery etc. and the qualifications are generally only available for enrolment to apprentices in Victoria; other students cannot access these courses. The salaries are aligned to levels of skill attainment and a first-year apprentice is usually paid a low income, rising as skills and knowledge increase. No apprenticeships are currently offered to incarcerated individuals in Victoria.

England has recently trialled a Pilot Apprenticeship Project with incarcerated people, which was of specific interest and provided the impetus to seek this fellowship.

The intention was to investigate the differences between the education strategy in Victoria and the Education strategy in similar sized prison estates in Scotland and England by reading all available publications, reports, journal articles and reports from Ofsted (Office for Standard in Education, Children's Services and Skills) and HMIPS (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons), visiting prisons, viewing the industry workshops (practical skill development areas), viewing education teaching classroom areas, and to see the education in action where possible. To talk with prison officers and Offender Service management staff, industry officers, education providers (including teachers and career staff) and incarcerated individuals themselves to elicit qualitative data, discuss prevalent issues and loosely compare education services provided: i.e. the requirements and expectations of the education services; and observe the attitude, group sizes and engagement of the prisoner/students.

The fellowship investigation was conducted over a 3-week period in situ in Scotland and England. In 2010 an earlier study trip provided an opportunity to investigate current work-based learning methodologies in Colleges and Universities in Scotland providing background knowledge of the vocational education system in Scotland and some familiarity with the Scottish College system which compares to TAFE (Technical and Further Education) in Australia.

As a member of the Australian Corrections Education Association and a Professional Member of the Australian Centre for Career Education, together with educational studies and employment positions over many years have permitted a level of expertise in the field of adult vocational education, work-based learning and prison-based education.

Past career highlights have included:

- Leading the Bendigo Kangan Institute Corrections Education Portfolio (2017 -2021).
- Managing and growing long-term industry relationships and partnerships including Mobil Oil, Arnott's Biscuits, Connex Trains and City West Water.
- Designing a tiered qualification structure and training program to meet industry skill needs of Technical Officers in the Water Industry that won a Deputy Prime-Ministers Award (2010).
- Leading two teams that have been awarded Victoria University Vice Chancellors citations for teaching excellence (2005) and Industry engagement (2009).
- Growing an education partnership between Victoria University and Connex Trains for the provision of education to the rail and public transport sector.

Relevant Accredited Education includes:

- Graduate Certificate in Career Development Practice, Aust.Centre for Career Education
- Internal Auditor Training Skill Set, Kangan Institute
- Master of Education (Work Based Learning), Victoria University
- Grad. Cert.in Leadership in Educational Management, Victoria University
- Diploma of Business – Frontline Management, Victoria University
- Leadership Development for Ed & Training Managers, Chair Academy
- Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education, Victoria University
- Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, Victoria University
- Bachelor of Education & Training, Melbourne University

# 05

## Fellowship Learnings and Findings

### 5.1 Setting the Scene

Incarcerated adults in Victoria have access to vocational education and adult basic education. They do not have the breadth of choice in education while in prison compared to those in community who have easy access to registered training organisations. Nor do they have the breadth of employment options when they are released that is available to people in the community that do not have criminal records. Consideration in the high-level design of the education services is currently to direct the learning to where there are jobs available in Victoria that can be accessed by ex-offenders.

The complexities of the educational environment, the residential custodial environment and the prison structured regime for learners that are incarcerated cannot be discounted in planning learning and these shape and reshape what education services can be made available for the learners, and *when* and *where* these are offered, and to *which* people they are offered.

In addition, the contractual obligations, custodial staff shortages and the security constraints at each facility further affect the services. The goal to increase language literacy and numeracy capability, build work readiness and provide an opportunity to look toward a better future post release is continually woven into and around all

the educational provision by dedicated teaching staff, further supported by prison industry staff, employment specialists and prisoner offender services and clinical teams.

Enrolment processes in TAFE in the community will require proof of identification, Australian citizenship or appropriate visa, a residential address, and numerous steps to complete the application. In addition, there may be a lengthy wait time for confirmation of enrolment

‘Depending on the institution they seek to enrol with, some will engage with an online enrolment process with the flexibility and support needed to complete key steps based on individual needs. More commonly, individuals will experience a rigid enrolment process that relies on manual processing and in-person visits’

(VAGO, 2019 pp 8).

For many incarcerated individuals, education provided inside the prison is more accessible than would be for them when they are at freedom. Classes are structured around the availability of the students, do not require transport, are at no cost and require none of the complexities of enrolment and fee collection required at mainstream TAFE. Importantly classes are not structured in a term or semester timetable permitting rolling enrolments

throughout the year. The smaller student numbers in each class, face-to-face with the teacher also allow students to interact directly with their teachers and access personalised support if required.

## 5.2 The Learners

Adult basic education and vocational education teaching and other learning support staff from Victorian TAFE providers that work inside prisons manage learner capability and behaviour challenges in their classrooms and workshops, working every day with people, some with diagnosed and undiagnosed learning, mental health and neurodiversity issues in facilities that are safe and secure, but do not mimic those in the community in 2025. Even with all the restrictions and limitations, opportunities for small successes that build confidence for these people still abound.

The *Correctional Services for People with an Intellectual Disability or an Acquired Brain Injury* report by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO, June 2023 pp1) provides an estimation from a Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) study in 2011 that 42 % of male incarcerated individuals and 33 % of female incarcerated individuals had an acquired brain injury. The report poses some estimates from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2018 and concludes that DJCS does not know how many incarcerated individuals have an intellectual disability or an acquired brain injury in 2023.

In the context of adult education, the cognitive impairments likely differ for each person. The VAGO report lists: thinking skills; memory; reasoning; comprehension; communication; and learning ability as areas that may be affected by acquired brain injury or intellectual disability.

The Scottish Prison Service Development and *Learning Strategy for people in custody Learning for a Better Future (SPS 2025)* provides a current snapshot of the profile and demographics of the Scottish prison population. Research was conducted in 2023 and included the complexity of characteristics including Autism, speech, language

and communication needs, learning difficulties and disability, and traumatic brain injury. The report estimates the incidence of speech, language and communication needs at 67%, and traumatic brain injuries at between 65-76%. The report asserts that the majority of people in custody have neurodivergent conditions and emphasise the importance of staff understanding the different needs.

Not all incarcerated individuals access education in Victoria, and without any data to provide insight, it is not known if education uptake for those with cognitive impairments is low or high, which classes or courses are accessed, and what interventions could be put in place to discourage avoidance and/or encourage participation, build work readiness, learn work skills and orient aspiration towards that better future.

## 5.3 Key Observations

Familiarity with most prisons in Victoria permits comparisons between the Scottish and English prisons that were visited and those in Victoria. There are many similarities between the jurisdictions.

Key areas of similarity include:

- a. the predominant style of education delivery: classes with fewer than 15 students; daytime classes only; teacher led; no internet access; and vocational courses primarily based around prison industries or essential prison operations including kitchen, laundry, grounds maintenance etc.
- b. the prison structured day which determines the morning unlock and evening lock-in timing, the allocated hours to the working day, and the muster counts throughout the day which all impact on availability of the students to attend education. Additionally, the availability is further impacted by in-prison work, health services, and professional and private visits.
- c. the security, safety and the good order of the prison which impacts tool use, allocation of incarcerated individuals to discrete physical areas of the prison and restricted availability

of incarcerated individuals who are prison essential workers; and,

- d. support to transition incarcerated individuals to employment post release, with specific employment options through relationships with employers willing to employ ex-offenders.

Key areas of dissimilarity Include:

- a. breadth of prison building ages
- b. broad availability of creative education opportunities in education in Scotland
- c. substantial input by charitable organisations to support education and employment in the UK
- d. neurodiversity officers in prisons
- e. small outside yard areas for recreation, often concreted

Victorian incarcerated individuals are housed in facilities built from the late 1960's to the most recent build, Western Plains Prison, due to commence operations in 2025. The prison estate, as it is termed in the UK, comprises the physical buildings and grounds, build age extremes are notable with 18th century buildings still in use, and new, trauma informed designed buildings slowly replacing the older prisons as finances permit.

## 5.4 English Prisons visited

**HMP Aylesbury** in Buckinghamshire has a history dating back to 1847, it is currently a training prison, aimed at providing skills for future employment. The prison currently houses 400+ long term young adult male incarcerated individuals. The prison was locked down on the day of the visit, due to prison staff training, not permitting access to the industry work areas which were closed. Training areas at Aylesbury currently include food packaging, hospitality, bicycle refurbishment, and construction multi-skills.

This visit was primarily dedicated to meeting with one of the Information and Guidance Advisors working from an employment hub in the prison. These people work with the men or women to develop personal learning plans. The initial plan is based on a questionnaire that the individual completes via a computer-based tool. The advisor

generally found that the questionnaire directions were not well understood, and one-on-one follow ups generally required to increase the level of detail to focus the plan on goal setting and preparation for education and employment on release. These plans are followed up every three months. The role also supports resume writing, advice on disclosure of criminal history and interview practice.

Peer mentors play an important role at this location. At HMP Aylesbury the peer mentors are visible by red band/t shirt. They are used in all areas to support others. Here, lived experience is valued.

### **HMP Parkhurst, HMP Albany, collectively HMP Isle of Wight**

HMP Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight in England was built in 1778 as a military hospital, barracks and children's asylum, becoming a prison in 1838. Together with HMP Albany, the two are known as HMP Isle of Wight (HMP IOW) and operate as a high security prison for 1000+ male high-risk offenders. The prisons are a major employer on the island sitting alongside tourism and farming. The cost of transport from mainland England to the Island largely prohibiting an off-island commute.

There were a few notable points of interest during the tour of the estate: the oldest building at Parkhurst was built by incarcerated individuals themselves in the early years, one round building with smaller windows reputedly held incarcerated children. A small museum is on the grounds, currently not in use due to building safety concerns. In addition, the location where hangings were conducted was pointed out. The Prison Governor advised that records kept onsite include all the convicts that came through there to be sent to Australia. The Governor was also confident that internet access for inmates (noting restrictions to white sites only and numerous other restrictions) is not too far away.

Parkhurst also has a trauma informed housing unit at Parkhurst and a medical unit for those needing ongoing care.

HMP IOW makes good use of prisoner peer mentors offering peer mentoring training for buddies and peer mentors. These people are used in industry areas to teach newcomers the tasks required and offer support. There are one or two peer mentors in every classroom.

Two large cabinet making workshops were humming with industrious men during the visit. Large and well-appointed they produce flat pack (with instructions) furniture for the new prisons being built. Law requires moisture and fire-retardant furniture, and the men work all areas of the production, CNC, sanding, spraying, test assembling, packaging, dispatch. In addition, there is an area where bespoke items are produced including a grandfather clock and another area where plaques, wooden name blocks for doors and desks etc are made. Hand cut 3 D life size military figures made from layers of wood are visible in public areas and in the workshop.

The workmanship is finely detailed and shows a very high level of skill acquisition. Notably, there are plaques made at this location which are subsequently sent to Government Ministries and given as gifts to other nations. The industry officer was pleased to advise that there were no behaviour issues. The building was filled with happy; primarily older men working diligently and chatting with each other while they worked.

HMP Isle of Wight has a large area for horticulture including grounds maintenance crews, 3 large hot houses, a small poly tunnel, hardening off benches and a few raised garden beds. About 50 men are employed in the production horticulture area of Albany. The teacher advised that restricted light through the weather dulled roof panels affects growth in the hot houses however tomatoes and capsicum are grown for the main kitchen with a harvest of an impressive 88 kg tallied at that point in the growing season, the latest yield proudly being wheeled to the kitchen that morning.

The teacher was impressive and very enthusiastic, supplementing the purchased seeds with cuttings and seeds from his home and preparing to increase the area of land in use for vegetable and flower

production. An expansion to include a kitchen garden is proposed so the men can learn this life skill to support their physical and mental health when they return to the community.

Due to the offending nature of these inmates and subsequent restrictions post release it is more difficult for the men at HMP IOW to find employment and there is an expectation that most of these men will be self-employed. A guidance pack for Incarcerated individuals to use to assist in seeking support through Government or other funding to start their own business and an 8-hour course introduction has been developed to support them.

A recently started industry was visited, a self-funding social enterprise that recycles and refurbishes furniture supplied by a charity. The men make good quality high sided trays, furniture and homewares from pallets and from furniture not suited to restoration. The furniture that is restored is given back to the charity to sell. No money from the sale at the charity goes to the prison.

Incarcerated individuals learn upholstery, repairing damaged wood and structural issues, and designing and upcycling from waste product. The enterprise is supported by fabric donations and wallpaper donations from the local hardware store. The very dedicated and passionate officer responsible for this budding industry advised she was also scouting for a property the prison could lease as a shop.

Examples of the skill, artistry and attention to detail included a wing backed chair upholstered in prison jeans (including the prison tags from the jeans) open cupboards/dressers wallpapered behind the shelves, hand painted art on wooden chairs, chests of drawers etc.

## 5.5 Apprenticeships

An apprenticeship in Australia formally combines employment with a learning on-the-job component and formal learning at a Registered Training Organisation. The apprentice is paid to learn. The outcome is real world skills and a nationally recognised qualification. The qualifications are

generally at Certificate III or Certificate IV level; however, they may also include Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels.

In England the situation is similar, however higher apprenticeships are also available. Higher Apprenticeships (Level 4 and 5) align with the first year of an undergraduate degree or at the level of a Foundation Degree and Degree Apprenticeships (level 6 and 7) permit the apprentice to be paid while completing an undergraduate degree or master's degree.

In England this breadth of availability of apprenticeships doesn't align neatly to the Australian model, however there are sufficient similarities in the modes of learning the skills and knowledge, and the registration and formalities of the apprenticeships for the experience of the English model in prisons to provide insight. The publications produced by the New Futures Network in the UK to support the introduction of apprenticeships to incarcerated people are invaluable documents for researching methods to overcome the complexities in Victoria.

In Victoria some qualifications have restricted enrolment to apprentices only; not permitting any other students to enrol or complete these courses. The Australian 'Tradie' term which is used to shorten 'tradesperson' is the colloquial term for the outcome for many skilled worker apprenticeships. Advertising for apprentices in plumbing, electrical, mechanical etc areas use the 'Tradie' term to recruit. A trade career is seen as a viable career choice and is well regarded in Australia.

## 5.6 New Futures Network

Incarcerated individuals accessing apprenticeship training benefit from increased employability and employers hiring prisoner apprentices' benefit from the increased skills and enthusiasm of a career motivated employee.

The '*Prisoner Apprenticeships Programme: Employer Guide*' (HMPPS Department of Education July 2022) introduces the plans for Incarcerated individuals with a Release on Temporary Licence (RoTL) to have the opportunity to access

apprenticeship training. RoTL permits the prisoner to attend approved activities outside the prison during the day and return to custody at the end of the approved activity.

The Apprenticeship Programme was initially restricted to incarcerated individuals that were permitted day release from the prison environment or close to the end of their prison sentence and has been expanded more recently to include closed apprenticeships. Closed Apprenticeships permit employers to choose an apprentice that will commence the apprenticeship whilst incarcerated and attend the employment location upon release where they will then complete the apprenticeship. The education component is 20% of the apprenticeship, the on-the-job learning comprising the remaining 80%.

Where work is not available in prison that aligns with the apprenticeship, the 20% off-the-job training can be front loaded and completed in prison. The employer commits to the employment arrangement with a Memorandum of Understanding signed at the outset between all the stakeholders. The apprentice is paid through the prison pay at the level allocated by the Prison NOMIS allocation while incarcerated.

At the time of the fellowship research mainly large employers and Government Departments (including the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice) were accessing the prison apprenticeship model in England. Hurdles include candidate offence history, advertising in the prison and interviewing at the prison location. Restricted access and communication modes and the wait time before the new employee is released and can attend the workplace all impact potential employers.

The working day in the English prisons is restricted by the prison regime and is currently shorter than would be expected by an employer in the UK. The English managed prisons are looking toward bringing in a standard working week to replicate the expectation in the UK community to support work readiness.

The employer chooses the training provider with the funding for apprenticeships in England providing the employer with a levy to pay the training provider. For the RoTL Day release cohort, finding a training provider that can accommodate the restrictions in the learning environment; the prison regime; the prisoner rule requirements; and the employer needing to advertise and choose an apprentice from candidates who have no access to online recruitment make it a complicated process for the employer. For the Closed Apprenticeship model the choice of training provider is further restricted to those approved to operate inside the prison. A levy transfer allows HMPPS to pay the training provider.

## 5.7 Scottish Prisons Visited

### HMP Barlinnie

HMP Barlinnie in Glasgow, Scotland, informally known as 'The Big Hoose' opened in 1882. The HMIPS Annual report 2023-2024 reports an average annual population of 1367, 38% over the design capacity noting in the executive summary that the outdated infrastructure was not fit for purpose. HMP Barlinnie had several classes happening during my visit, and I was able to talk to students and teachers. At HMP Barlinnie, many of the education opportunities leaned toward creative pursuits, including a radio station 'Barbed Wireless' that broadcasts into every cell. The inmates research, script and record podcasts for broadcast.

**HMP Stirling** is purpose-built and the primary facility for incarcerated women in Stirling in Scotland, with a maximum capacity of 104, HMP Stirling opened in 2023. It is designed to offer improved treatment for women in custody. HMP Stirling had contemporary learning spaces, including a café and hair salon, no bars on windows and single cell accommodation, no cell style doors, and dedicated mother and baby facilities. The term 'prisoner' was not heard during my visit, the people in care live in purpose-built light filled houses surrounded by green space. It is a calm and quiet place. An area to learn independent living skills was also provided to these women.

**HMP Low Moss** opened in 2012, housing 800+ male incarcerated individuals primarily with sentences of less than 4 years and those awaiting trial. It is a modern open community facing design with large white walls showcasing prisoner art and modern classrooms and industry workshops including a bicycle repair workshop linked to an Edinburgh charity.

**HMP Shotts** was built in 2012 housing 500+ adult male offenders and houses the National Integration Centre facility for incarcerated individuals at the start of sentences of 8 years+.

Industry areas at HMP Shotts included sewing, timber, metal, grounds, kitchen and laundry work parties. At HMP Shotts, 'Stir' an award-winning art magazine is produced by incarcerated individuals using high quality graphic design building the magazine from contributions and contributors coming from across the Scottish Prison estate.

## 5.8 Scottish Development and Learning Strategy

The Scottish Prison Service had completed a report at the time of the fellowship research. The report was released post the fellowship in-country research in 2025 '*Learning for a Better Future: A Development and Learning Strategy for people in custody*' (Scottish Prison Service 2025). Developed through service user and stakeholder research and a comprehensive literature review, the report provides the evidence base for the Scottish strategy which seeks to build the literacy, numeracy, oracy and digital competency of people in custody, to boost their self-efficacy through education, learning and contributions as skilled workers and as mentors. Providing the support and structure to nurture a change in life direction of the people in their care and enable them to have a better life upon release.

Four strands for development and learning are summarised in the report:

- Learning for Health and Wellbeing.
- Learning for Empathy and Citizenship.
- Learning for Life and Work; and
- Learning for the Benefit of Others.

These four strands form a whole person approach to planning and designing the services which includes a broad range of stakeholders involved in the realisation of the approach including local prison management and staff, the education service provider and national support, tools, policies and guidance. This whole person service direction also links to aims and strategies of other SPS strategies and so does not impose a discrete or bolted-on service. The demonstration of motivation and confidence are key learner outcomes in the SPS strategy.

Dr Brieghe Nugent, author of *Literature Review to Support the SPS Education and Employability Strategy* (2024) in the Executive summary highlights and emphasises from the wider research on education, the importance of positive relationships: the importance of relationship between teacher and the learner required for successful educational attainment; of people feeling heard and listened to by their teachers; of teachers having compassion; offering a safe place to learn; and creating a learning environment where the students feel safe and are inspired.

The key messages also note the additional challenges faced in prisons including: the complex needs of people in prison; poor infrastructure which can make teaching difficult, the lack of digital resources, transfers of incarcerated individuals and prisoner movement; and bureaucracy.

The accompanying guidance document to “*Learning for a Better Future: A Development and Learning Strategy for people in custody*” (Scottish Prison Service 2025) summarises the 12 principles from the literature review in Part 1: Evidence that support the strategy and an individuals’ development and learning journey:

... These should be **rights based, relational**, have choice, be **inclusive and trauma informed**. They should include **staff development**, be **diverse and incentivise learning**. They should also include **community connection** and promote **desistance**, while offering **enrichment and life-wide & learner-centred development and learning opportunities**.

Learning for a Better Future SPS Development and Learning Strategy for people in Custody Guidance (SPS, 2025 pp 3)

In Part 2 the ‘Whole System Approach’ outlines the social practice approach of building on a person’s strengths, interests and aspirations providing recognition of life events shaping learning needs. Different entry and exit points, changing learning needs, varying social, cultural and economic backgrounds and personal, family, and community areas all playing into the diversity of the cohorts and individuals needs and capabilities at a given point in time.

The SPS report puts a strong focus on whole of person approach citing that:

*‘The curriculum needs to cover a broad suite of skills development, these will include life, social & transferable skills, recognising that these skills can be as important as academic achievements.’*

Learning for a Better Future SPS Development and Learning Strategy for people in Custody Guidance (SPS, 2025 pp 18)

# 06

## Considerations and Next Steps

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### 6.1 Victorian Focus

The Victorian focus of education services is to support a better or preferred future pathway through literacy and numeracy development and work readiness. Funding through the Victorian Government directs education to these areas; vocational guidance and employment specialists are provided to support individuals throughout their journey toward employment.

This Victorian focus on employment is understandable, admirable and targets well for capable individuals in good physical and mental health in their prime earning years heading for employment on release.

### 6.2 Prison to Employment: apprenticeships

Those in the prime earning years also include a high percentage of individuals with sentences of 1-5 years (39.7% in 2022/2023) which would provide a ready pool of individuals that may aspire to a career as a tradesperson. The Annual Prisons Statistical Profile 2014 to 2023 cites the 2022/2023 year as having 10,585 receptions into Victorian Prisons (DJCS, 2024, Table 1).

The 1+ year sentence length providing sufficient time to prepare for the opportunity with targeted literacy and numeracy learning support, apply for positions and commence the trade training. Many

prisons in Victoria have industry employment roles that align to trade areas bolstering skill development.

The 2024 into 2025 Victorian Skills Plan promotes apprentices and trainees as playing a vital role in delivering government priorities and further discloses that occupations in demand will require a growing number of apprentices in carpentry, electrotechnology and plumbing (Victorian Skills Authority, 2025 pp 18). These employment areas of high demand made available to incarcerated individuals would offer these people the prospect of a better future and would benefit the Victorian economy.

The road to achieving this outcome contains many hurdles at present including the course enrolment restrictions and employment requirements for apprenticeship registration in Victoria.

Apprenticeships Victoria (AV), within the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (DJSIR) oversee the apprenticeship system in Victoria. Training schemes are approved by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) which governs which apprenticeships are available and approves employers. (Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, 2025, pp 1) In Victoria, when an apprentice is incarcerated, the formal training contract and apprentice registration is suspended or ended. The incarcerated individual

cannot then continue their learning while in prison disadvantaging the person and ending their learning path during their period of incarceration. Navigating some of the hurdles in the road would also provide an opportunity for apprentices that were registered prior to incarceration, so they could continue some of their apprenticeship studies while in prison.



Figure 1. Image from Report on an independent review of progress at HMP/YOI Aylesbury by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 29–31 August 2023

### 6.3 Prison to Community – data for interrogation

Not all people in prison will return to the community to paid employment for a variety of reasons including physical and mental health, neurodiversity limitations, cognitive and learning capability e.g. thinking skills; memory; reasoning; comprehension; communication affected by acquired brain injury or intellectually disability, continuing community restrictions, advanced age, visa status etc and the streamlined focus does not cater well to those incarcerated individuals.

Financial constraints cannot be discounted, however nor should any group be further disadvantaged. With the VAGO (2023, pp 1) report indicating that DJCS does not know how many how many incarcerated individuals have an intellectual disability or an acquired brain injury in 2023 and the more recent Scottish research indicating an expectation that speech, language and

communication needs sit at 67%, and traumatic brain injuries at between 65-76%. It would not be unreasonable to pose that in 2025 there is likely to be a substantial portion of the Victorian Prison population requiring specialised learning support which is currently not targeted accurately to those in need and that many of these people may not be well suited to available jobs in the community after their release from prison.

The Scottish Four Strands approach: *Learning for Health and Wellbeing; Learning for Empathy and Citizenship; Learning for Life and Work; and Learning for the Benefit of Others* (Appendix 1) highlights the deficiencies in Victorian focused approach which restricts the ability for all individuals to be educationally supported to develop personal interests, to learn to support others, express themselves through creative pursuits and to acquire independent living skills, e.g. vegetable production, cookery for the home etc.

As not all incarcerated individuals access education in Victoria, collection of data linked to the specific learning and communication support needs could provide an insight about education uptake for those with cognitive impairments, which classes or courses are accessed and assist in the design of interventions to encourage participation.

### 6.4 Career Aspirations

In Victoria, all sentenced prisoners are offered the opportunity to work with a qualified career development practitioner to develop a learning plan and review these annually. The plans are based on hope action theory, motivating incarcerated individuals to think about their future and plan for a better or preferred future.

There is currently no aggregated data from the many thousands of learning plans developed offering an opportunity for further research into aspirations and the factors that influence aspirations of incarcerated individuals.

# 07

## Impacts of Fellowship

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The fellowship investigation allowed an exponential increase in knowledge and understanding of possibilities, hurdles and different ways forward in the prisoner education space. This is being shared with the managers and the team in the Corrections Education Centre at Bendigo Kangan Institute and with the Education and Vocational Training (EVT) Department at Corrections Victoria (CV) as opportunities arise where the learning, knowledge and publication content are relevant.

As a manager with the responsibility of looking for innovative ways to provide education services relevant to a range of target groups within the prison education environment, to overcome obstacles, and to enthuse, stimulate and encourage teachers, the fellowship has opened the very securely closed gates to the hidden and private world inside prisons in England and Scotland, offering first-hand insights, examples of excellent practice and opportunities for discussion with professionals working in the same niche areas with similar student cohorts and similar digital restrictions.

As a largely hidden area of education delivery in Victoria, few people are aware of the focus, services or outcomes of education and vocational training offered to incarcerated people or the benefits to these, often multiply disadvantaged individuals and their families when the previously incarcerated person can return to the community with work ready skills to enter employment and build a better future for themselves and their families.

In addition to the increased professional knowledge and prisoner/student focussed outcomes, the fellowship afforded a personal concentrated and focussed investigation into a niche area of vocational education inside prisons, eliciting a broader and deeper understanding of the various perspectives that define the directions taken by different jurisdictions. This learning and development have provided impetus for this Fellow to look forward to enrolling in a research higher degree. As a matured aged person, the reduced family time commitments of a now adult family allow the luxury to commit to embarking on a larger study.

# 08

## Sector Engagement (Dissemination):

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As a worker in the field, the fellowship learning can be disseminated in practical applications and steps toward sector improvement.

Opportunities to present learnings are restricted in this niche area and will be accessed at all available opportunities. The Victorian Skills Authority hosted a justice themed event in February 2025 VSA-ISSI FELLOWS FORUM #9: strategies to support at-risk and justice-impacted learners, where this Fellow presented. The Department of Education and Vocational Training at the Department of Justice and Community Safety have graciously arranged presentations to Corrections Victoria employees dedicated to prison employment in prison based education, prison based employment specialists and both prison and Corrections headquarters based managerial staff and TAFE partner employees to further encourage and provide impetus to progress along the path toward prison based apprenticeships in Victoria. The next Australasian Corrections Education Association (ACEA) Conference will also likely provide additional opportunities to share and disseminate to a wider audience of dedicated prison vocational educators.

The circle of influence from the fellowship learnings has expanded to include connections between CV and the Victorian Building Authority (VBA) to discuss the restrictions and current scrutiny on apprenticeships applications for people with criminal histories wanting to be plumbing apprentices and has opened up a line of communication between EVT and Apprenticeships Victoria.

With the support of CV, a focus on breaking down some specific barriers to apprenticeship enrolment post release have commenced. It is not expected that any changes will happen quickly, and patience, perseverance and political will are all required to make structural changes happen.

# 09

## **Conclusion**

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This fellowship opportunity has provided professional and personal growth and an increased breadth and depth of knowledge about the in-prison vocational education sector. It has provided a personal education pathway and a professional goal to increase opportunities to level the playing field for education provision for incarcerated individuals in Victoria.

# 10

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# 11

## Appendix

### LEARNING FOR A BETTER FUTURE – Strands for development and learning

#### Learning for health and wellbeing

- Building mental, emotional and social health and wellbeing
- Addressing separation, loss and trauma
- Sustaining and building positive family relationships
- Addressing needs such as alcohol and substance misuse, relationships and attitudes
- Addressing barriers to learning
- Ability to read, tell the time, use a calendar and plan
- Building physical health and fitness, and knowledge of how to maintain health and wellbeing
- Developing the skills and knowledge needed to live independently
- Building resilience and motivation
- Participating in sports and the arts

#### Learning for life and work

- Oracy, literacy, numeracy
- Digital competence
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Extending knowledge and carrying out research
- Experiencing a workplace and gaining skills and qualifications for employment e.g. barista, forklift driving
- Being an effective member of a team
- Developing skills and knowledge for self-employment
- Gaining qualifications and building a CV
- Increasing motivation and capacity for further learning

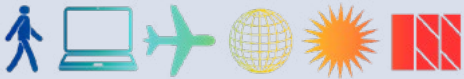
#### Learning for empathy and citizenship

- Engaging in issues-based work such as anti-violence programmes
- Understanding consequences, empathy and victim awareness
- Developing skills to change and applying these to make positive choices
- Building understanding of human experiences and perspectives through literature and the arts
- Learning to express thoughts and feelings
- Learning about and addressing ethical, social and environmental matters
- Participating in decisions making and self-evaluation

#### Learning for the benefit of others

- Parenting programmes
- Family learning
- Peer mentoring and /or teaching
- Using personal skills in projects that will bring enjoyment or benefits to others e.g. through the arts
- Engaging in restorative practices
- Volunteering
- Fundraising
- Caring for animals
- Renovating, repairing, upcycling
- Supporting others to achieve a goal in partnerships and in teams

(Scottish Prison Service, *Learning for a Better Future*, 2025 pp 10)



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