Making the Connection: Allowing access to digital higher education in a correctional environment

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In most Australian correctional jurisdictions, prisoners are not allowed access to the internet precluding them from participating in higher education online. This paper reports on an Australian government-funded project, *Making the Connection*, which is taking digital technologies, that don't require internet access, into correctional centres to enable prisoners to enroll in a suite of pre-tertiary and undergraduate programs. A version of the University of Southern Queensland's learning management system has been installed onto the education server of participating correctional centres. The second stage of the project will see notebook computers preloaded with course materials, allocated to participating prisoners. At the time of writing, the project has been deployed at eight correctional centres in Queensland and Western Australia, with negotiations underway for further rollout to Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. It is expected that the technologies and processes developed for this project will enable the delivery of higher education to other cohorts without access to reliable internet access.

Keywords: correctional education; digital inclusion; digital divide; higher education; digital equity

Introduction

Prisoners in most Australian jurisdictions are not permitted to access online learning technologies due to procedural restrictions prohibiting prisoner access to the internet. Formal education and training delivery to prisoners is currently provided in non-digital forms, usually in the form of blocks of printed text. Although this method enables access to course materials, it does not develop digital literacies in incarcerated students, and these skills are becoming essential in order to pursue formal learning outside of correctional centres. Currently, there are few programs offered to incarcerated students that adequately prepare them for entry into higher education and even fewer that provide incarcerated students with the opportunity to use modern ICTs.

Distance education has traditionally been viewed as means by which prisoners could access education in correctional centres, delivering education and resources to students who are unable to undertake traditional face-to-face education (Salane 2008). Formal education and training delivery to prisoners in Australia is currently provided in non-digital forms using large volumes of printed copies of the course materials and learning support resources, sometimes supplemented by CDs for use on in-cell laptops or in computer labs (Dorman and Bull 2003). This is costly for universities to assemble, print and post, is in no way interactive, and cannot incorporate all of the learning support resources of the course. Incarcerated students often have very little or no contact with each other and are not able to leverage the social learning supports that are available to students engaged in online courses. This undermines the social constructive pedagogy favoured in many post-secondary programs and poorly prepares students for a world in which employers expect their employees to be familiar with social networking and other web 2.0 resources (Erisman and Contardo 2005). Furthermore, the traditional forms of delivery to incarcerated students do not enable incarcerated students to develop the crucial graduate attributes including digital literacies, collaborative teamwork and critical thinking skills required to successfully complete studies in higher education and also to obtain meaningful employment after release from custody. This paper reports on a project, *Making the Connection*, that

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is taking digital technologies into correctional centres, aiming to help students access higher education and obtain the digital literacies they need for work or study.

The project: Making the Connection

In the latter half of 2013, a team of researchers at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) were awarded $4.39 million over three years by the Australian Government under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program for a project titled *Making the Connection: Improving Access to Higher Education for Low Socio-Economic Status Students with ICT Limitations.* Beginning in early 2014, the project built on three previous projects led by USQ which trialed various digital technologies for learning in correctional centres. Most notable of these was the Office for Learning and Teaching-funded project, *From Access to Success*, which developed a version of USQ's learning management system (LMS), a version of Moodle called USQ StudyDesk, which was installed onto the correctional centre education lab server. This server had no capacity to access the internet and was physically isolated from the main administrative correctional centre network. This new version of the LMS was called the USQ Offline StudyDesk and was installed by education officers from self-loading DVDs produced at USQ. The USQ Offline StudyDesk allowed incarcerated students to access course materials including interactive multimedia and assessments via computers in the education lab, without needing to access the internet. The *From Access to Success* project ran at two correctional centres in Queensland using two courses from the Tertiary Preparation Program, an enabling program run by USQ's Open Access College. Students successfully completing this program are granted automatic entry into specific USQ undergraduate programs.

Making the Connection is building on *From Access to Success* by continuing to develop the USQ Offline StudyDesk so that is robust, repeatable and reliable. One of the findings from the earlier project was that incarcerated students had only a few hours a week to access the correctional centre computer labs. This was because of the competition from other courses and programs, including vocational programs, for the space, and because students were typically employed in jobs in 'industries' within the correctional centre, restricting the time available to study. To help overcome these difficulties in access, the *Making the Connection* project will be providing notebook computers to participating students so that they can take them back to their cells and continue working in their personal time.

Developing appropriate technologies is only a part of the challenge of providing higher education to incarcerated students. Appropriate courses and programs had to be adapted for use on the technologies and for use without access to the internet. Taking into account the levels of previous academic achievement in the correctional centres and jurisdictional sensitivities around students accruing HECS debt, there is a focus on the courses of the Tertiary Preparation Program and the Indigenous Higher Education Pathways Program, both Commonwealth-funded enabling programs. These programs are supplemented by three diploma programs: the Diploma of Arts (Social Sciences), Diploma of Science (Environment and Sustainability) and Diploma of Business Administration.

A major part of the project is focused around engagement and outreach. The project has employed and Engagement Leader and also an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Engagement Coordinator. The latter is in recognition of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the correctional context. Making up some 2 per cent of the general population, they make up a staggering 28 per cent of the prisoner population nationally (ABS 2015).

USQ Offline Study Desk

At the beginning of the project, a detailed options analysis was undertaken to ensure that the USQ Offline StudyDesk installed onto a correctional centre education lab server was still the preferred technological approach. Various alternative options were examined including 'Moodle-on-a-stick' and secure cloud solutions. A team comprised of USQ ICT Services and *Making the Connection* personnel determined that the preferred solution remained installing the USQ Offline StudyDesk on a separate server linked to the education lab network via network switch.

In the online environment, the USQ StudyDesk works with a Learning Objects Repository (LOR) which holds course content. Course content is vetted for copyright status and tagged with metadata to make it searchable. When a student accesses a resource via the StudyDesk, he or she is actually

accessing that resource through the Learning Objects Repository. This is obviously not feasible for those students using the USQ Offline StudyDesk. To address this issue, a bespoke piece of software, called a 'compiler', automatically harvests objects housed in the LOR and packages the resources with the course for export to the correctional centre. Another piece of software called a 'checker', goes through each course to ensure that files within each course are functional and that links to the internet have been removed.

At the moment, the transfer of courses between USQ and the correctional centres occurs via DVD. In the near future, education officers will be able to download courses through a kiosk, hosted at USQ and accessed via the administrative network (which is internet-enabled). The version of the USQ Offline StudyDesk is approximately one version behind the main production version to allow for any glitches to be ironed out. The USQ Offline StudyDesk is currently installed in eight correctional centres in Queensland (7) and Western Australia (1).

Notebook computers

Because incarcerated students have limited access to the computer labs, it was decided that it would be desirable for students to have a personal device that they could take back to their cells. As with the modified LMS, these devices are not permitted to access the internet. Focus groups with incarcerated students participating in eBook reader trials in a previous project were critical of the small screen size and onscreen keyboard used in these devices. Taking this feedback onboard, the project team conducted a detailed options analysis of some 32 tablet computers, laptops and notebooks. It was decided that a Windows notebook would be most suitable as it had an almost full-size keyboard, adequate processing power and screen real estate was not compromised by an onscreen keyboard. In addition, students would be able to use Microsoft Office or OpenOffice to complete assessments. The project team are trialling the USQ Offline StudyDesk on the devices but are also considering using a HTML presentation layer to display course materials. These options will be trialled during the next phase of the project and hope to have the notebooks deployed into correctional centres before the end of 2015.

Courses and programs

The deployment of these technologies into correctional centres is just one part of the *Making the Connection* project. A suite of USQ courses and programs are being adapted for use without the need for internet access, to be used with the USQ Offline StudyDesk and the personal devices. A number of factors were taken into consideration when choosing the programs for modification. These included:

1. **Average sentence length:** Some 90 per cent of prisoners are sentenced for one year or less.
2. **Previous academic achievements and experiences of the students:** Most incarcerated students are from low socio-economic status backgrounds and have low levels of academic achievement.
3. **Cultural background of the students:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Low levels of education remain a key part of the ongoing cycle that leads to this over-representation.
4. **Previous enrolment patterns for incarcerated students:** USQ has been providing education to incarcerated students for around 25 years and has records of what programs incarcerated students have typically enrolled in.
5. **Vocational outcomes:** The project team consulted with careers advisors at the university about what careers ex-offenders could reasonably expect employment in and what programs would prepare them for these careers.
6. **Practicality:** The project team talked to course examiners (course coordinators), Heads of School, and Executive Deans about which courses could reasonably be adapted for delivery in the correctional environment. Courses with significant practical components or residential components were considered to be unsuitable.

In addition, the jurisdictional owners expressed concern about the potential for incarcerated students to acquire a significant HECS debt. They worked closely with the project team to ensure that HECS debts would be kept to a minimum and would provide the best outcomes for students.

The *Making the Connection* project team selected the following courses to be used with the USQ Offline StudyDesk and personal devices.

1. **Tertiary Preparation Program: Six** courses from the Tertiary Preparation Program were selected for modification. These included general English and study skills courses, math courses and a humanities course. Successful completion of the Tertiary Preparation Program allows students automatic entry into selected USQ programs. This program is Commonwealth-funded enabling program and does not attract HECS fees.
2. **Indigenous Higher Education Pathways Program:** Six courses will be adapted from this program as part of the *Making the Connection* project. It is expected that this program will prove popular given the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners and that Indigenous students are half as likely to have completed year 12 as non-Indigenous students. Again, this is a Commonwealth-funded enabling program for which students will not incur a HECS debt (Salane 2008).
3. **Diploma of Arts (Social Sciences):** Eight courses will be modified with an emphasis on community welfare and development.
4. **Diploma of Science:** This program will emphasize sustainability and the environment. Eight courses from this program will be modified.
5. **Diploma of Business Administration:** Historical data shows that most incarcerated students have enrolled in business programs. Again, eight courses from this program will be modified.

Diploma programs were selected in acknowledgement of the typically short sentence length of most prisoners. Also, it was decided that it would be more beneficial to offer a selection of courses across a range of disciplines, rather than concentrate course modification efforts around one discipline as with a degree program.

Course modification happens over an eight-week period called a 'sprint'. A 'sprint team' comprised of learning designers, elearning designers, elearning technical support officers, copyright compliance officers, graphic designers, multimedia designers and other elearning professionals as needed, work with course examiners to create a plan for the modification. Online offerings of courses are moved to a specially designed Offline Course Development Area A number of activities are involved in course modification.

1. Courses are scoped so that the sprint team and the course examiners gain an idea as to how much work will be involved in modification.
2. Course materials are checked for copyright compliance.
3. Course materials are moved into the Learning Objects Repository.
4. Links to the internet are removed and alternative resources sourced if necessary.
5. The look and feel of the course is enhanced to ensure easy navigation.
6. Alternative assessments are designed if necessary.
7. Additional self-marking quizzes are incorporated to provide immediate feedback on knowledge recall.
8. A welcome video is created to help the incarcerated student feel connected to the course examiner.
9. The course is checked before being readied for deployment to the correctional centres.

Typically, courses are modified in batches of six and are adapted in the semester before the next offer of that course. Course examiners' time is bought out by the project. Funds are typically used for teaching or marking buyout. The course redesign process has been so successful that some course examiners are transferring resources developed as part of the project to the online offerings of their courses.

Results

The Making the Connection and the projects that preceded it provides a real and significant improvement to the traditional learning experience for incarcerated students by enabling students located in prisons across Australia to experience learning that is customised and personalised. So far, these projects have improved the learning experience across 239 enrolments in the in scope USQ courses (refer Figure 1).

Enrolments across correctional centres participating in the learning initiative
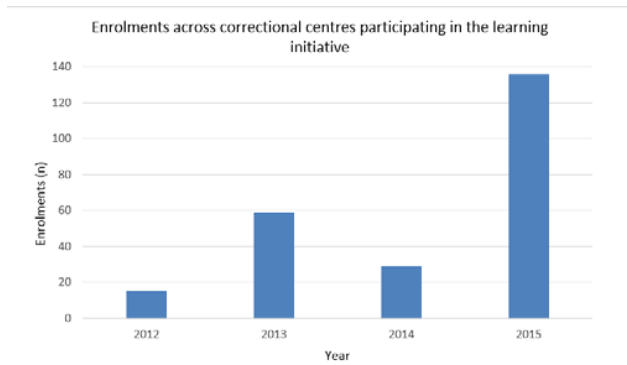
Some testimonies from incarcerated students demonstrate the impact of the projects:

It's interesting that they treat education different to the core programs, when in fact it is the best form of rehabilitation. You are not going to change your person from some silly little 6 month course … educate a person and give them the skills they need to have a legitimate, successful employment status. If you don't give them the tools they need, they are going to go nowhere. They definitely should be pushing the education flagship much, much further.

I found it as an opportunity to redeem myself with my education. I really enjoy learning again. I was involved with drugs for a while but now my mind is clear I really enjoy learning again.
Having my kids see me and see me move on to a career - so my kids can see I am going to turn my life around. Hopefully, I can turn things around because I don't want them thinking it's fine to come to jail because it's not.

I have been institutionalised my whole life. And I have another life sentence yet to do. I'm starting to think that I can help younger kids to not do the same mistakes that I did. Do courses, and get out and stay out. That's my main motivation, is helping the younger generation and the youth in detention.

I never had a computer while I was young but I learned to type while I was doing this course at the start of the semester.

The future

The *Making the Connection* team will be rolling the technologies and programs to additional correctional centres in Queensland and Western Australia before the end of the year. There is also strong interest from corrective services departments in New South Wales and Victoria. Jurisdictional owners have also expressed an interest in the availability of even shorter courses and programs to be offered to prisoners with very short
sentences. To this end, the team are working with the Open University in the UK to make a selection of their Open Learn courses available in the offline environment.

Perhaps the most exciting possibilities lie in making these technologies available for all those students without reliable internet access throughout Australia and the world. For example, broadband internet penetration is restricted in most countries within Southeast Asia due to the poor infrastructure. This is mostly attributable to a lack of private investment coupled with the severely limited capacity of the people to pay for services (Jeroschewski et al., 2013). The technologies and programs developed as part of the *Making the Connection* project have the potential to make higher education accessible to those otherwise unable to travel to a large city to study face-to-face, allowing people to remain in their communities and support the economic and social development of their regions.

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