Teaching ‘inside the wire’ in an Aotearoa New Zealand prison: A collaboration between the University of Otago and Otago Corrections Facility

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While the benefits of prison education have been established[1], access to education in prison faces multiple barriers including limited opportunities provided by tertiary institutions; a lack of digital access; institutional barriers (including limited movements to classrooms and restrictions on mixing of cohorts); and motivational barriers (often brought about by poor experiences with formal education) [2]. Potential students often have histories of experiencing social disadvantage and structural inequality that have impacted their prior-prison learning. In Aotearoa New Zealand prisons, there are currently only about 30 learners engaged in higher education (out of a population of 7,708 on 29 April 2022). It is a key goal of Ara Poutama Aotearoa/Department of Corrections (Corrections) to invest further in education [3] and to ensure people being released from prison have the necessary levels of education for full participation in society [4].

In 2021, as part of a pilot spearheaded by the first author (University of Otago) and second author (Corrections), students at Otago Corrections Facility (OCF) have been able to enrol in a University of Otago first-year Sociology course. This pilot is the only current initiative in which university courses are being taught in person ‘inside the wire’ in an Aotearoa New Zealand prison. The “in person” teaching experience has provided the students with the opportunity to maintain the same schedule as students in the community, and Corrections staff have observed that it has had a positive impact on their confidence, behaviour and planning for their future. As a result of this successful pilot, as of 2023, learners have been able to enrol in additional courses through University of Otago.

Aotearoa New Zealand has fewer in-person collaborations in terms of higher education than other jurisdictions. While some Universities offer distance learning initiatives, in-person teaching is a key area that requires development as it can prepare incarcerated students, many of whom were excluded at an early age from formal schooling and may not have the confidence for the independent learning required for distance education, for further education. As we develop our initiatives, we are drawing ideas and inspiration from other countries’ approaches. However, as Ludlow et al. [5] argue, we also need to “reflect critically on how different socio-political and cultural realities” might shape the particular nature of higher education and criminal justice institution partnerships in the local setting.

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1 Aotearoa is the Māori language name for New Zealand
Key considerations for tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand prisons:

1. **Treaty of Waitangi obligations**: Due to the ongoing impacts of colonization, the prison population in Aotearoa New Zealand is disproportionately Māori (15% of the general population and 54% of the prison population) [6]. The question of equitable access to education in the prison setting (or the lack thereof) is not just one of access more broadly but raises key issues in terms of Treaty principles and obligations with both University of Otago and Corrections being treaty partners that represent the government. Our initiatives, in aiming to facilitate further engagement from incarcerated learners in higher education, meet the strategic goals of both the University and Corrections.

2. **Cultural Responsivity**: It is not only that Aotearoa's Indigenous population are over-represented in prison, but they are also the majority group in Aotearoa New Zealand prisons. Educational initiatives therefore need to be culturally responsive wherever possible.

3. **Prisoner Demographics**: Aotearoa New Zealand generally has a higher incarceration rate overall than comparable countries such as England or Australia, but like settler countries such as Australia, it has a particularly high incarceration rates of indigenous people. Aotearoa has a higher proportion of violent and sexual offenders, and sex offenders doing long sentences, than comparable Commonwealth or European jurisdictions [7]. While transfers do mean that the population of OCF can be somewhat unstable, which can make continuous teaching across a semester occasionally challenging, there are a sizeable number of people with sentences long enough that tertiary teaching is both viable and important. On the other hand, security concerns will always be a factor in managing on-site prison teaching.

4. **Limited number of courses offered**: A key issue facing incarcerated students is a lack of available tertiary education options and a clear pathway to achieving a degree. Our initiative involves expanding the available offerings. In 2023, students will be able to enrol in a first-year political science course and social work course. This pilot will allow increased opportunities for incarcerated men to explore a range of subjects in areas of interest and provide a pathway to ongoing higher learning.

5. **Informational access**: Prisoners may face similar barriers to other adult learners, including limited information about education programmes and procedures [8]. Imprisoned students in particular may have little information about the programmes available or the processes through which they apply or pursue courses [2]. While the students who have completed the available course have done so successfully, only a small number of students have thus far participated. Informational barriers are a key challenge for increased enrolment. A project is currently underway to produce a handbook containing relevant information.

6. **Digital access**: Digital access is a key issue. Higher education practices in the contemporary era often assume a particular type of student – standard entry, preparedness for learning, digital access and digital literacy. Higher education is
increasingly supported by digital resources, a development accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to hybrid and distance delivery models. This shift means that the right of access to education is jeopardised for those without access to digital resources, including incarcerated students [9]. Although digital access for the students at Otago Corrections Facility during the recent Sociology course improved, with lectures viewed live via audio-visual link, people under the care of corrections continue to have limited digital access for educational purposes compared to learners in the community. We are therefore looking to collaborate on exploring and evaluating new initiatives in this space.

7. Economic pressures on Universities and Corrections. Aotearoa New Zealand universities are trying to manage with continual underfunding and are looking to either cut programmes or not to take part in programmes that cost rather than bring in money. Much of what we do as academics comes out of our own pocket, (e.g., travel to a rural prison), is not counted as part of workloads, or if it is, is counted at the same rate as providing classes for on-campus students. Education provision in prison is resource-intensive and class sizes are small. However, given that correctional educational programming is one of the most effective tools in the reduction of recidivism [10] and particularly so for tertiary level education [1], such programmes are cost-effective compared to costs associated with recidivist prisoners. It is therefore vital that tertiary education providers and the Corrections continue to collaborate to provide quality educational opportunities and adequately resource these initiatives.

While there are key challenges to be addressed when providing tertiary education in the Aotearoa New Zealand prison setting, the current collaboration between University of Otago and Otago Corrections Facility highlights the potential for positive movement in this space. We anticipate that planned initiatives for this collaboration, in terms of additional options, increased information provision and digital access, will allow more incarcerated people to participate in tertiary education. This will have positive impacts on recidivism and contribute to the safety and wellbeing of incarcerated learners, their families and communities.

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References