

Submission to Queensland Productivity Commission Inquiry Into Imprisonment and Recidivism

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In this submission I wish to address the following term of reference:

In the context of the Government's objective of ensuring a fair, safe and just Queensland, the Commission should consider:

The effectiveness of programs and services in Australia and overseas to reduce the number of people in and returning to prisons, including prevention and early intervention approaches, non-imprisonment sentencing options, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners. (Queensland Productivity Commission, 2018a)

This submission serves to draw the Queensland Productivity Commission's (QPC) attention to the role of prison libraries in supporting prison programs aimed at the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners.

I have developed a professional interest and expertise in this area in my work as a university educator specialising in library and information studies at RMIT University, Victoria University, Monash University, and from December 2018, Charles Sturt University.

- My doctoral thesis, titled *Experiencing Australian prison libraries: a phenomenological study* (Garner, J 2017), was based on extensive research into the role and value of libraries in prisons, from the prisoners' perspective.
- Following this research, I have published related studies and have worked with the Victorian Department of Justice and Regulation, and the United States Department of Justice, National Institute of Criminology to advise on how prison libraries can support correctional outcomes of prisons and jails.
- I manage the Prison Libraries Interest Group for the Australian Library and Information Association and was a contributing author to their *Minimum standard guidelines for library services to prisoners* (Australian Library and Information Association), published in 2015.

Current prison library services, both in Australia and elsewhere, are guided by a number of documents, standards and guidelines. These documents have been developed by library associations, correctional administrators, and the United Nations (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1957). The United Nations document, the *Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*, mentions prison libraries, in Section 40:

Every institution shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it.

(United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1957).

The *Standard Guidelines for Corrections in Australia* (Australian Correctional Administrators, 2012) was developed with the United Nations document in mind and mentions libraries twice. In section 1.17, dealing with the entitlements of remand (uncharged) prisoners, the *Guidelines* state:

Remand prisoners and all prisoners who have legal matters pending, whether they are on remand or sentenced to a term of imprisonment, should have access to legal library resources, including where practicable supervised access to electronic media for the purpose of viewing electronic legal documentation (p.17).

The second mention of libraries is in section 2.54 of the *Guidelines*, dealing with prisoner wellbeing. The language here is derived in part from the United Nations document:

Prisoners should have access to a library, adequately stocked with both recreational and information resources, which is operated according to standard library practice. Prisoners should be encouraged to make full use of the library (p.28).

These documents state that all prisons must provide a library service to their inmates, but provide no guidance as to how these libraries should be managed. This gap is filled by the *Minimum Standard Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*, published in 2015 by the Australian Library and Information Association (Australian Library and Information Association, 2015).

Despite the availability of useful guidelines, and a recognition in these guidelines of the importance of providing a library service to prisoners, prison libraries are not being used to their full advantage. It is my belief that prison libraries have significant potential to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners. A well-funded, managed, and appropriately stocked prison library can be used to support prisoners' education and literacy development. It is currently extremely rare for a prison library to be funded, or managed by a librarian. Rather, the collections are built from prisoners donating books they have received as gifts, or from other donations, and the libraries are maintained by prisoners who have been allocated this task as their work duty. There is little or more

usually, no attempt to utilise the libraries as educational resources, thereby missing a valuable opportunity to allow libraries to support prisoner learning, rehabilitation and literacy development.

There is a well-recognised link between prisoner education and a reduction in recidivism. All prison vocational programs are based on this premise. This link is identified in the QPC *Imprisonment and recidivism issues paper* in Section 7 where it is stated that one way of reducing recidivism is to provide “education, work and rehabilitation programs for offenders” (2018b, p.14) There is also a well-recognised link between access to a quality library, and improvements in educational and literacy outcomes for learners (Hughes, Bozorgian & Allan, 2014). When funded and managed professionally, a prison library will support prisoner learning and will contribute to the correctional goal of reducing rates of recidivism.

Prison libraries have the potential to benefit all prisoners, regardless of their sentencing status. They can have an influence on the informal education and literacy development of the thousands of remand prisoners who have no access to prison programs until they have been formally sentenced. In 2015 to 2016, 5,568 prisoners were admitted to remand, with 60% later to be released without a custodial sentence. These prisoners spend an average of 6 months in prison without any access to prison programs, training or education (Queensland Productivity Commission, 2018b p.14). A well-managed library would provide these prisoners with learning and literacy opportunities to ensure that these extended periods on remand can have positive outcomes for prisoners.

Prison libraries can play a positive role in supporting the reintegration of prisoners. In my doctoral study (Garner, 2017) many prisoners explained how they were able to maintain a link with their partners and children by reading books from the prison libraries. Often the prisoners and family members would read the same book at the same time, creating a link between the prison and family life outside. Their shared reading provided an opportunity to be involved in each other’s lives and supported conversations during visitation and phone calls. Links to families can also be facilitated by programs such as ‘Read Along Dads’ as described in the ABC News article, *The reading program helping dads in prison stay connected to their kids* (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2018). Prison libraries can support and provide materials for such a program.

The goal of this submission to the QPC is to ensure that prison libraries are recognised as a powerful resource in supporting the effectiveness of prison programs and services designed to reduce the number of people returning to prison. I wish to ensure that the inquiry recognises the potential of libraries in prisons as powerful resources that can support the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners. It is important to note however that the current funding and management practices of prison libraries makes it impossible for the libraries to contribute fully to the correctional outcomes of rehabilitation and reintegration. It is my hope that this current inquiry results in the funding and support for prison libraries that will allow them to fulfil their potential as powerful partners in corrections.

I would be happy to expand on the information in this submission if it would assist the inquiry.

References

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