Western Australian Auditor General’s Report

Improving Prisoner Literacy and Numeracy

Report 31: 2020-21
23 June 2021
Office of the Auditor General
Western Australia

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ISSN: 2200-1913 (print)
ISSN: 2200-1921 (online)

The Office of the Auditor General acknowledges the traditional custodians throughout Western Australia and their continuing connection to the land, waters and community. We pay our respects to all members of the Aboriginal communities and their cultures, and to Elders both past and present.
Improving Prisoner Literacy and Numeracy
IMPROVING PRISONER LITERACY AND NUMERACY

This report has been prepared for submission to Parliament under the provisions of section 25 of the Auditor General Act 2006.

Performance audits are an integral part of my Office’s overall program of audit and assurance for Parliament. They seek to provide Parliament and the people of WA with assessments of the effectiveness and efficiency of public sector programs and activities, and identify opportunities for improved performance.

This audit assessed how effectively the Department of Justice addresses the literacy and numeracy needs of adult prisoners.

I wish to acknowledge the Department’s staff for their cooperation with this audit.

CAROLINE SPENCER
AUDITOR GENERAL
23 June 2021
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Auditor General’s overview

An individual’s literacy and numeracy skills underpin their ability to engage in many aspects of everyday life. Limited literacy and numeracy can make it difficult for people to engage in the core activities like finding a job or housing, or paying bills and accessing government services and support. For many people in the prison system, the traditional education systems were not successful in giving them functional literacy and numeracy skills. There is considerable research that shows that education is an important component influencing a prisoner’s risk of re-offending.

While the Department of Justice (Department) does not have a primary role to educate prisoners, it is both a positive way that prisoners can spend their time while in prison, and is one way that the Department can proactively reduce the risks that prisoners will reoffend. The Department does a good job of assessing the literacy and numeracy needs of prisoners and providing appropriate courses which are adapted to meet those needs. Courses are delivered by qualified teachers.

There are factors that can make it difficult for prisoners to access courses which the Department could do more to address. It could also do more to measure the effect of their courses on prisoners’ skills. While time in prison can provide an opportunity to improve prisoners’ literacy and numeracy, it is important to be realistic about the progress that they can make. Sustaining improvements when someone leaves prison, and reducing the chances of someone coming back to prison, could be improved through linkages to both community corrections and adult education providers.

Even small improvements can make a large difference in a prisoner’s life after release. The dedication of education staff in the Department in working with prisoners, and in developing, adapting and continually improving courses are a large part of why many prisoners have taken the opportunity to improve their skills while in custody.
Executive summary

Introduction
This audit assessed how effectively the Department of Justice (Department) addresses the literacy and numeracy needs of adult prisoners.

We focused on the services delivered by the Department’s Education and Vocational Training Unit (EVTU).

Background
There are 17 adult prisons across Western Australia (WA) – 7 metropolitan and 10 regional. During 2019-20, the daily average number of prisoners was 6,957, costing just under $1 billion a year to keep them in custody. Effective rehabilitation strategies can reduce reoffending and the subsequent costs to the State as well as support individual and community safety and well-being.

Research shows there is a strong link between education in prison and positive post-release outcomes, including:

- reductions in reoffending, particularly a reduction in serious crimes¹
- gaining employment.²

In WA, this link has been most significant for young adults in the 18-24 age group.³

The WA Parliament Community Development and Justice Standing Committee found that poor literacy was 1 of the biggest educational issues facing the majority of the prison population.⁴

The Department has also recognised that prisoners have low levels of literacy and numeracy skills. In its Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2017-2020 it states that 80% of all prisoners in WA are at or below the skill level expected of an 11 year old in reading and writing.⁵ Further, the Department’s strategy identifies employment as the single most important factor involved with reducing reoffending. Therefore the Department developed a range of literacy and numeracy courses aimed at improving the likelihood of prisoners retaining employment post-release.

The Department’s EVTU, as a registered training organisation (RTO), provides voluntary education activities that aim to improve prisoner literacy and numeracy. In the 16 public prisons they offer a variety of courses across all levels of capability, from entry level literacy and numeracy courses through to facilitating TAFE and university studies.

The way in which the courses are taught varies and includes classroom-based activities as well as education embedded into other practical courses. Each of the courses provide recognised, formal education qualifications (e.g. certificates) to those who successfully complete the course. Between 1 March 2018 and 31 March 2021, EVTU delivered courses to over 11,000 adult prisoners.

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⁴ ‘Making our prisons work’: An enquiry into the efficiency and effectiveness of prisoner education, training and employment strategies, report No. 6 in the 38th Parliament (2010)
⁵ Department of Justice Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2017 – 2020
Education activities at the privately run Acacia Prison are part of the overall contract for the prison and therefore the responsibility of the contractor rather than EVTU.

**Conclusion**

The Department has implemented sound processes to identify prisoner literacy needs, particularly to identify those with low literacy skills. However, these processes are not as effective at identifying prisoners with low numeracy skills as not all prisoners being assessed complete a numeracy element.

Sound processes also exist to create course content. Course material is independently reviewed and course structures are designed to allow for the frequent movement of people between prisons. The content is tailored to the skills and interests of the prisoner group and meets RTO certification requirements. Courses are delivered by qualified teachers.

However, there are factors that prevent or discourage prisoners from attending and engaging in literacy and numeracy courses. Moreover, the Department cannot demonstrate how effective the courses are at improving prisoner literacy and numeracy as it is not being measured.
Recommendations

To strengthen the provision of literacy and numeracy services, the Department should:

1. develop appropriate measures to confirm that courses and programs are delivering the intended benefits efficiently and effectively

   **Entity response:**

   Discussions have commenced with Curtin University with a view to working with the School of Education, to advise on conducting an evaluation of the micro progressions of literacy and numeracy skills gained as well as social and emotional domains, with the outcome being a self-sustaining policy and program of evaluation.

   As recommended, to strengthen the provision of literacy and numeracy services the Department will establish a robust quality assurance process over the state wide assessment activities to ensure integrity of baseline data. The project will encompass realigning of disbursed assessment staff under one reporting structure and a key lead role for quality assurance, data integrity and staff training.

   **Implementation timeframe:** August 2021 – January 2022

2. investigate and mitigate challenges that prevent or discourage prisoners from attending class and classes being run.

   **Entity response:**

   The Department commissioned an independent review of Education, Employment and Transitional Services (EETS Review) business area in 2019/20. The EETS Review Implementation Plan outlines the following actions which support a portion of the examples given in the OAG Summary of Findings:

   - Monitor and report to Superintendents and Deputy Commissioners impacts from Adaptive Routines on scheduled Education Centre programs and vocational training in Prison Industries.
   - Establish procedures regarding ‘movement alerts’ to minimise withdrawing from specific training to maximise rehabilitation outcomes (e.g. university, traineeships and TAFE delivery).
   - Review and identify barriers to engagement from the gratuity system.
   - Research how other jurisdictions operate gratuity systems and provide recommendations to improve the current system to maximise education engagement.
   - Consultation to occur with Knowledge and Information Technology business area on strategies for how to address barriers to improve access to prisoner ICT.

   **Implementation timeframe:** August 2021 – December 2022
Response from the Department of Justice

The Department of Justice has welcomed the Office of the Auditor General’s performance audit on Improving Prisoner Literacy and Numeracy. Literacy and numeracy is a fundamental skill for effective functioning in modern society. By virtue of their imprisonment, prisoners are unable to access community programs in basic education. Prison offers a unique opportunity to acquire skills in a structured, flexible and non-threatening environment where, as the report acknowledges, professionally qualified Education staff provide quality tailored literacy and numeracy services to prisoners.

The Department supports the findings and recommendations as outlined in the report and is committed to implementing strategies to address the recommendations to improve literacy and numeracy services to prisoners in custody.

The Department has a well-established history of partnering with universities to co-design, innovate and evaluate correctional education services. Initial steps have been undertaken to work closely with our university partners to seek advice on conducting an evaluation of skills gained by prisoners. The Department will establish a program of evaluation of micro progressions of literacy and numeracy skills gained and ensure robust quality assurance process over state wide assessment activities to ensure integrity of baseline data.

In 2021, following an independent review of Education, Employment and Transitional Services, the Department developed a number of strategies to address barriers preventing prisoner engagement in literacy and numeracy training, which will be addressed during the implementation phase, with a planned completion date of July 2022. In addition and in response to the Office of the Auditor General’s report, the Department will also undertake a state wide review of current access to education and training by all prisoners, at all prison sites, with the view to achieving equitable access wherever practicable.
Audit focus and scope

The audit objective was to assess how effectively the Department of Justice addresses the literacy and numeracy needs of adult prisoners.

We based our audit on the following criteria:

1. Are prisoners’ literacy and numeracy needs understood?
2. Do literacy and numeracy programs address identified needs?

We reviewed the Department’s approach to assessing prisoner needs and developing material for literacy and numeracy education units. In undertaking the audit we:

1. reviewed the Department’s policies and procedures
2. interviewed key Department staff
3. conducted a site visit to Hakea Prison
4. analysed data from the Department’s learning management system
5. reviewed contract management processes to obtain limited assurance over the service provider at Acacia Prison
6. reviewed prisoner feedback on the education services that the Department obtained during their usual feedback processes.

This audit did not examine the literacy and numeracy needs of juvenile prisoners.

This was an independent performance audit, conducted under Section 18 of the Auditor General Act 2006, in accordance with Australian Standard on Assurance Engagements ASAE 3500 Performance Engagements. We complied with the independence and other ethical requirements related to assurance engagements. Performance audits focus primarily on the effective management and operations of entity programs and activities. The approximate cost of undertaking the audit and reporting was $163,000.
Audit findings

Prisoners with low literacy levels are offered opportunities to improve their skills

The Department identifies prisoners with low literacy levels, but numeracy screening is limited

The Department has put in place documented processes to assess prisoner’s skills. Prisoners undergo a 3 stage assessment to identify their literacy and numeracy skills (Figure 1). The process has been documented in an internal guideline. Clearly documenting processes encourages consistent implementation.

As screening and assessment is voluntary, the Department’s process adapts to the skill level of the prisoner. This is not a linear process, rather it is an adaptive process that considers prisoners’ skills from the outset to encourage engagement. The screening tool requires that only those with the appropriate skills proceed to the computer-based assessment, avoiding overwhelming prisoners who have lower skill levels.

Source: OAG using the Department’s information

Figure 1: Summary of the literacy and numeracy screening and assessment process

The Department uses standardised tools to assess prisoners’ literacy and numeracy against the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). They use an initial checklist to identify the prisoner’s education history and other aspects that may impact the prisoners’ education such as hearing or eyesight issues. “At risk” prisoners are identified using an internally produced screening tool which provides an initial understanding of a prisoner’s ability to undertake further testing.

The screening tool is a paper-based form where prisoners write their details (name, address etc.) and a paragraph describing a picture. Those with the skills to do so progress to an off-the-shelf computer-based assessment which identifies the prisoners’ skills against the individual elements of the ACSF. The exception is those that have high literacy levels who can choose to engage in education without undergoing the computer-based assessment. Using standard tools facilitates consistent assessments of prisoners’ skill levels.

The screening tool does not assess numeracy. If people progress to the computer-based assessment their numeracy skill is able to be measured, but not all prisoners progress to this. For example, at risk individuals do not have the basic comprehension skills needed to progress to the computer-based assessment. Additionally, individuals with a literacy score of level 4 or above (Table 2), may choose not to undertake further assessment because they can engage with education without doing so. This means that prisoners with higher literacy skills may not have their numeracy skills assessed. Often people with higher literacy skills do
not have the corresponding numeracy skills. In these cases, their numeracy needs will not be identified and therefore their knowledge gaps will not be addressed.

**Many prisoners have low literacy and numeracy skills**

On 31 March 2021 there were 6,793 prisoners in custody, and almost half (2,938 prisoners, 43%) were assessed against the ACSF. There are several reasons why over half the prisoners were not assessed against the ACSF including prisoners opting not to undertake the assessment, being assessed under a historical methodology or those who were only in custody for a short period of time (e.g. in 2020 38% of remand prisoners stayed for less than a week, and a further 31% stayed for 1 to 4 weeks). Regardless, a subset of 43% of all prisoners in custody provides a reasonable indication of the literacy and numeracy skills across the prisoner population.

Of those assessed under the ACSF methodology, 1% of prisoners could not read or write (Figure 2). Thirty-four percent of the prisoners can only read clear familiar information and may need to read words by sounding out letters. For Aboriginal prisoners assessed, this increased to nearly 55%. The results show that low literacy is common among prisoners and the situation is significantly worse for Aboriginal prisoners.

![ACSF literacy levels](image)

Source: OAG analysis using the Department’s learning management system information

**Figure 2: Summary of WA prisoners’ ACSF literacy levels as assessed by the Department**
Table 2: Summary description of ACSF literacy levels

Of the 2,938 prisoners assessed under the ACSF methodology, 1,881 (64%) were assessed to determine their numeracy skills. Of these, 587 (31%) had low numeracy skills, meaning they can only recognise whole numbers and simple 2 dimensional shapes (like a circle). For Aboriginal prisoners assessed, this increased to over 55%. In addition, there were very few people who operated with strong numeracy skills (8%). The results show that low numeracy is more common among prisoners than low literacy.

![ACSF numeracy levels chart]

Source: OAG analysis using the Department’s learning management system information

Figure 3: Summary of WA prisoners’ ACSF numeracy levels as assessed by the Department

Source: OAG summary of the ACSF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACSF level</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 or below</td>
<td>Locates and recognises key mathematical information in simple activities or texts.</td>
<td>Individuals can recognise whole numbers and familiar 2D shapes like circles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Identifies and comprehends relevant mathematical information in familiar activities or texts.</td>
<td>Individuals can recognise analogue and digital times as well as simple everyday fractions like 50%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Selects and interprets mathematical information that may be partly embedded in a range of familiar and some less familiar tasks and texts.</td>
<td>Individuals can recognise date and time in 24 hours times and measurements like volume and capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 or above</td>
<td>Extracts and evaluates the mathematical information embedded in a range of tasks and texts.</td>
<td>Individuals can recognise ratios, negative/positive numbers and can understand details from maps.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OAG summary of the ACSF

Table 3: Summary description of ACSF numeracy levels

Courses to improve numeracy and literacy were delivered to more than 11,000 prisoners in just over 3 years

The Department’s learning management system data shows that between 1 March 2018 and 31 March 2021, it delivered about 24,000 literacy and numeracy courses to over 11,000 prisoners across 71 different qualifications working towards a Certificate I in Entry to General Education. Courses included dedicated literacy and numeracy classes, and courses where these skills were embedded into the course content. Over the period, prisoners successfully completed 21,593 courses with a literacy and numeracy element. This includes courses that were completed via a recognition of prior learning. It is standard practice in adult learning to acknowledge prior learning and this allows prisoners to quickly move onto other courses. By providing a wide range of courses that aim to improve prisoner literacy and numeracy in different ways, there is a higher chance of engaging more prisoners.

Examples of dedicated literacy and numeracy courses during the period March 2018-2021 include:

- Entry level one reading and writing (913 enrolled and 664 successful completions)
- Use mathematics at Entry to General Education level I (460 enrolled, 408 successful completions).

Examples of courses where literacy and numeracy is embedded include:

- Prepare for the learners permit drivers test (190 enrolled, 163 successful completions)
- Complete basic forms (279 enrolled, 254 successful completions)
- Managing personal bills (149 enrolled, 124 successful completions)
- Plan healthy eating on a budget (1,172 enrolled, 1,060 successful completions).

Course content is developed, tailored and reviewed to meet prisoners’ needs

The Department uses sound processes to ensure the quality of its course content. Qualified teachers develop the content. Course materials are tailored to the skills and interests of the

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prisoner group. All course material is independently reviewed by the relevant education manager and technical experts prior to being tested as a pilot. Following robust processes to develop content helps to align course content with prisoners’ needs.

Course content is designed to meet RTO certification requirements. Mandatory learning objectives must be met for a prisoner to receive a certificate. The Department maps course content to these objectives to ensure there is alignment between the training delivered and the requirements for participants to receive a certificate. In November 2018, the Training Accreditation Council of WA extended the Department’s status as an RTO as they complied with the nationally agreed standards.

The Department has designed course structures to take into account the frequent movements of prisoners while in custody. Prisoners can be moved to attend court, for security reasons, to attend treatment programs or for family reasons. About 840 prisoners (12% of the prison population) are transferred between facilities each month. The Department has divided the content needed to complete a certificate into smaller courses that can be completed in a shorter timeframe and are offered at multiple prisons. By creating flexible structures, prisoners are more easily able to engage and continue their studies if they are transferred.

The Department can demonstrate that teachers have the appropriate skills

Teachers’ skills are verified prior to teaching a course. All staff are required to prove they have the specific skills required for each course. They submit their qualifications and detailed CV outlining prior experience in the specific subject matter, which is verified by the Campus Manager. The documentation is also reviewed centrally by the training coordinator to confirm the Campus Manager’s review was accurate and the teacher’s skills are suitable for the course. A Microsoft Excel based tool captures all of the teacher’s competencies, courses they can teach, as well as locations they can teach at. Having verified, centralised information allows Campus Managers and head office staff to easily identify suitable staff.

Teaching staff are required to attend professional development activities to continue to improve their skills. They capture their attendance at these activities in a training record. The records are collated annually and independently reviewed by the training coordinator to make sure staff complied with the training requirements. These requirements have been captured in the professional development guideline, however Department staff we spoke to were not aware of the policy. By making sure staff are adequately skilled, courses will be delivered to an appropriate standard.

Processes are in place to improve course delivery

The Department has implemented multiple processes to monitor their course delivery performance, including:

- conducting internal quality assurance reviews of each course completion to verify the results and that RTO requirements were met
- conducting internal moderation of course results where teachers peer review student results to confirm they are being consistently assessed across the state
- obtaining feedback from prisoners’ routinely as part of their RTO requirements
- conducting Indigenous Vocational Education and Training feedback sessions with Aboriginal prisoners, community representatives and elders every 6 months.

Frequent monitoring of performance provides the opportunity for the Department to adjust its services in a timely manner.
There are multiple constraints that can limit prisoners' ability to attend and fully participate in education courses, including:

1. Physical access – the infrastructure of the prison may mean prisoners of different security levels or gender cannot always access the area of the prison where the classroom is located. For example, this occurs in Hakea Prison because prisoners with affiliations to different outlaw motorcycle gangs need to be separated. This results in prisoners from 1 gang not being able to travel through the prison to access the education centre.

2. Education centre capacity – the size of education facilities vary between each prison, but often there is limited space where prisoners can participate in classes. For example, when fully staffed with education and custodial support, Hakea Prison can provide education for up to 60 prisoners at a time. There are almost 1,000 prisoners currently at Hakea.

3. Security supervision – custodial officers are required to be in education classes to maintain safety and security. If custodial officers are reallocated to other sections of the prison for other duties, classes that day have to be reduced or cancelled. At Hakea, from May 2020 to May 2021 there were 160 days when education classes were expected to be delivered with the support of 2 custodial officers. However, due to the lack of custodial support classes were cancelled 13% of the time and reduced to only 25 participants 52% of the time. The education centre only ran at its full capacity of 60 prisoners 36% of the time. Late cancellations are demotivating for prisoners and can impact the ability to retain casual teachers, as they do not get compensated if the class is cancelled at the last minute.

4. Staffing – as of 9 June 2021 there were multiple education staff vacancies (5 roles, 6% of FTE), particularly in the regions (4 roles, 9% of FTE). We have been informed there are many reasons why finding staff is difficult, including some locations are considered less desirable places to live, there are more lucrative employment opportunities and the unique learning environment in prisons can be confronting.

5. Financial incentives – prisoners receive small payments for performing work, education and vocational activities. These funds are used to pay for phone calls and items in the canteen. Payment levels operate on a banding system based on perceived importance and difficulty of an activity, which is determined by each prison. Education activities are not always rewarded as highly as other activities. This can mean some prisoners choose between going to classes or attending higher paid work. For example, at Hakea Prison prisoners working in the kitchen are paid at the highest rate as it is an essential service required to run the prison. Someone working in the kitchen may not consider undertaking education if they believe they will lose their kitchen role and associated income.

6. Disabilities – while prisoners are asked during on-entry assessment if they have any hearing or sight issues, some may not be aware they have issues or may not be comfortable admitting that they do. This can limit their ability to fully participate in education activities. Education staff will try and adapt their delivery to cater for disabilities (e.g. more breaks for those with cognitive issues) and will supply limited materials to support the learners (e.g. glasses for the prisoners to borrow during class).
The Department, the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee and the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services have also previously identified many of these challenges to prisoners receiving education services as part of their review and oversight activities.

**The Department cannot demonstrate if they are effectively improving prisoner literacy and numeracy**

While prisoners’ literacy and numeracy levels are assessed on entry, they are not reassessed on course completion or prior to release. The Department’s *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2017-2020* states that re-assessing prisoners would occur, but this has not yet happened. We acknowledge that the Department wants to foster an environment that encourages continued engagement and re-testing may be confronting for the prisoners, but without re-assessing prisoners’ skills, it is difficult to determine how their literacy and numeracy skills have actually improved.

The Department’s ability to make informed decisions on which courses to run and how to deliver them is limited by the lack of measures to determine improvements in literacy and numeracy skills. This is compounded by a lack of information about the cost of delivering each course. This type of information is needed to ensure the Department is effectively comparing education options. We recognise that there are limited RTO certified courses that the Department can deliver, however there is flexibility in the way that they deliver the course content and therefore these measures are still needed.
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