

# Learning to Desist

Exploring the relationship between engagement in  
prison education and desistance from crime

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# Declaration

## CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP:

I, Fiona McGregor, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Education, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program

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# Abstract

This qualitative study explores the relationship between the engagement in prison education and desistance from crime. As a practitioner, I saw a disconnect between the growth learners appeared to experience over time in class and the dominant deficits-based policies, curriculum and pedagogical practices. Education was being understood as a criminological factor based on neoliberal ideas around increased employability leading to reduced reoffending. It felt such an understanding may not sufficiently capture the value of education for learners in prison nor its impact. This thesis applies the theoretical lenses of learning and desistance to adult male learners' experience of intensive prison education to develop a more robust understanding of its impact on incarcerated learners and the value of quality education within prisons.

Significantly, this thesis adopts atypical prison education research methodology, drawing on a strengths-based, more socially-just Appreciative Inquiry approach, together with ethnographic case study and thematic analysis to explore the self-identified best learning experiences of and impact on thirteen adult male learners in full-time basic skills education. The unique purpose-built Intensive Learning Centre in a medium security prison in New South Wales provided an exceptional opportunity to research the learning process when the conditions of learning space, program, staff relations and equal pay opportunities are optimal.

Findings indicated that even the most reluctant learners seemed to experience attitudinal shifts towards their capacity to learn, capabilities, and both the desire and ability to desist from crime. Three key themes of *Being*, *Becoming* and *Belonging* were identified as significant to the learners, especially in relation to their experiences of place, culture, identity and basic skills acquisition which were bound by a sense that the educational space, programs and relationships were profoundly normalising and emancipatory.

This thesis shows that engagement in high-quality prison education, even at the basic skills level, within fit-for-purpose learning spaces does much more than increase learners' employability by raising their literacy and numeracy levels to a 'functional'

standard. In addition, basic-skills education in prison can support the development of learners' hope, capability, agency, empathy and an interest in civic engagement – characteristics mirrored by successful desisters. Accordingly, this has important implications for prison education policy, programs and pedagogy as well as staff professional development. This thesis suggests that understanding desistance as a learning process and learning as a capability-building process beyond employability may help us support our learners better, develop and deliver better prison education and, ultimately, better prisons in which the desistance process can be catalysed and assisted.

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## Abbreviations

AEVTI	Adult Education & Vocational Training Institute, the Registered Training Organisation within CSNSW responsible for most education and training of prisoners at the time this research was undertaken (it was subsequently and almost exclusively subcontracted out to private providers from January 2017).
CEO	Corrections Education Officer
CSNSW	Corrective Services New South Wales
DOC	Designing Out Crime Centre, School of Design, Architecture and Building, University of Technology Sydney.
ILC	Intensive Learning Centre
NSW	New South Wales, Australia
SCEO	Senior Corrections Education Officer (Education Manager)
SMAP	Special Management Area Placement
UTS	University of Technology Sydney



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