Ghosts in the machine

Incarcerated students and the Digital University

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Providing higher education to offenders in custody has become an increasingly complex business in the age of digital learning. Most Australian prisoners still have no direct access to the internet and relatively unreliable access to information technology. As incarceration is now a business, prisons, like universities, are increasingly subject to economistic pressures and priorities. Historically Britain's penal colony, (post)modern Australia is following the United States toward a post-Welfare Penal state. Without specialised support and materials, incarcerated students may pay the price of converging neoliberal reforms. This paper aims to raise awareness among Australian academics of the challenges faced by incarcerated students in changing socio-political and economic climates.

Keywords: incarcerated students, prison education, penal state

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage.
Richard Lovelace (1642)

Stone walls, iron bars and hardware

While stone walls and iron bars do not a post-Fordist prison make, incarcerated students remain disadvantaged by their imposed isolation from networked digital communication technologies. The majority of Australian prisoners have no direct access to the internet which not only frustrates their access to higher education but leaves them inadequately prepared for re-entry to the twenty first century information society and economy. Previously, prisoners undertaking university study could rely on hard copy, paper course materials which were printed and posted out by distance education providers. However, with the ascendency of eLearning, tertiary study has moved online and increasingly out of reach of prisoners who do not have reliable access to networked computers. In many cases, the digital revolution has exacerbated the marginalisation of incarcerated students. Despite public misconceptions about 'doing time,' the management of time and technology in a prison is generally not conducive to the successful completion of higher education programs. Behind prison walls, students are particularly vulnerable to the economic, technical and political rationality of neo-liberalism, which promotes the digitisation of mass education, the vocationalisation of higher education, the shift to a post-Welfare punitive state, higher levels of social inequality and the populist dehumanisation of outsider groups.

In particular, this paper discusses the obstacles and constraints faced by incarcerated university students in light of the increasing integration of electronic learning or eLearning in Australian higher education. The data and motivation for this paper derives from teaching incarcerated tertiary preparation students, both at a distance and face to face. The aim of this paper is to raise awareness among academics regarding the multiple barriers and practices that adversely affect prisoners who choose to study and to offer suggestions on how to better support incarcerated students. On another level, this discussion also highlights the limitations of official discourses of 'access' against the landscape of neoliberal reform in both prisons and universities. The increasingly precarious position of incarcerated students reflects the contradictions and complexities of 'democratised' and

digitised higher education within a political climate of economic rationalism and prison privatisation.

Ghosts inside the digital learning machine

Incarcerated learners are in the main a doubly disadvantaged subgroup of low socioeconomic status, isolated and marginalised students. In part this is because Australia's use of incarceration reproduces and reinforces social and economic inequalities related to race and social class. As Reiman & Leighton (2010) succinctly put it, in their influential review of the American criminal justice system, 'the rich get richer and the poor get prison.' With more than 10.2 million people held in penal institutions throughout the world (ICPS, 2013) we are moving toward what De Giorgi (2006) calls a new age of 'great confinement' and its new forms of post-welfarist social regulation. The United States is leading the world in incarceration rates with 698 prisoners per 100,000 citizens (ICPS, 2013). As in the United States, Australia increasingly deploys mass incarceration as a way of dealing with racial minorities and dangerous members of the working class and underclass, to the point where prison overcrowding is now another significant burden incarcerated university students must bear.

Australian prisoners are typically poor, uneducated and unemployed at the time of incarceration (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014; Bedford, 2007; White & Perrone, 1997; White & Graham, 2010; Vinson, 2004, 2007; see also Reiman & Leighton, 2010) and are likely to stay that way without adequate support for further education. Education is key to effective prisoner rehabilitation and successful social reintegration (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2006; Smith, 2014). Indeed, given the potential for discrimination against those with a criminal record in increasingly competitive labour markets, it is especially important that prisoners receive fair and comparable access to higher education while incarcerated.

Unfortunately, prisoner access to technology and tertiary education varies greatly across the nation's six states, two territories and over one hundred correctional centres. Unlike many Scandinavian countries, where internet access is provided for educational purposes, Australia does not provide prisoners with direct access to the internet. In Norway, where students have better access to higher education and access to internet enabled computers in their cells, the recidivism rate is 20 per cent (Smith 2014). Recidivism rates are much higher in Australia at 59 per cent and in Queensland two-thirds or

66 per cent of prisoners have been imprisoned previously (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014; Smith 2014). Could improved access be a factor in recidivism?

If they have access to an education officer (not all incarcerated students do) Australian prisoners must put in a request to have online educational materials printed for them (where this is permitted or possible). Mobile phones, storage media and internet enabled tablets are typically barred from Australian prisons. While some universities provide distance education students with multi-media course resources on compact discs, not all incarcerated students have access to a computer. Access to books and computer hardware may be difficult, especially in "secure" or high security units, due to restrictions and limitations on movement, time, space and technology within the prison. Whereas Scandinavian countries employ a rehabilitative rather than punitive approach, Australia seems to be following the American model of increased and interconnected incarceration, isolation and privatisation, with higher education increasingly displaced by vocational training.

Australia – the penal state

The Australian prison population has recently hit a ten year high, with 33,791 people in adult corrective services custody, and incarceration rates rising, especially for women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The national imprisonment rate is now 185.6 prisoners per 100,000 adult population – which is almost three times higher than in Scandinavian countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014; International Centre for Prison Studies, 2015). Incarceration rates are even higher in Queensland at 192.9 prisoners per 100,000 adult people – the highest imprisonment rate since 2004. Over 90 per cent of Australian prisoners are male, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise over one quarter (9,264 or 27 per cent) of the total prisoner population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The female imprisonment rate has however more than doubled in recent years (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015). The most common offence for which both men (21 per cent) and women (20 per cent) were in custody was acts intended to cause non-fatal injury or harm to another person, where there is no sexual or acquisitive element (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Australian governments are planning more prisons despite the fact it costs around A$174 a day to keep a prisoner behind bars (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2006)

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and there is actually little evidence that criminalising more behaviours and increasing sentences actually deter crime (Ritchie, 2011).

Reflecting on the 'carceral boom' or 'the great penal leap backward' of the United States, Wacquant (2005) and De Giorgi (2006) suggest there has been a wholesale shift from the welfare state to the penal state. Supposedly, the object of this new post-Fordist penology is not actually crime prevention, but rather to manage risk by isolating and incarcerating social groups perceived as inherently dangerous, such as the poor, immigrants and people of colour, through mass incarceration of the underclass and mass detention of 'illegal' immigrants (De Giorgi, 2006; Wacquant, 2005). Overcrowding in Queensland prisons, Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, including children in detention, and the alarming fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise over one quarter of Australia's prisoner population (Australian Bureau of Statistics ABS, 2014) lend some credence to this argument. This shift from the welfare state to the penal state has also been accompanied and supported by the related shift from rehabilitation to punishment implicit in public discourses around 'getting tough' on crime and criminals.

Of 'monsters' and men: the dehumanisation of prisoners

Australia's current conservative federal government likes to 'talk tough' about stopping boats, stopping crime and stopping the 'age of entitlement'. A common complaint in populist debate is that prisoners are actually being rewarded for crime with access to free meals, housing, medication, electricity, exercise equipment and education. Much of the media outcry is also premised on the belief that prisoners access a better standard of living than their victims. Considering their victims may come from the same socio-economic underclass, currently facing further welfare reforms, sadly this may well be true in some cases. Nonetheless, there are significant benefits to society as a whole in breaking the cycle of incarceration and disadvantage. Even from an economistic 'burden to the state' perspective, the cost of continued incarceration far outweighs the costs of higher education provision. Although both Liberal and Labor governments have profited from aggressive law and order campaigns which cultivate the perception of being 'tough on crime', in reality harsher sentencing actually does not work in terms of deterring crime (Ritchie, 2011). Putting money back into public education, public housing, social welfare

and community support is a better long term solution to crime than building more prisons.

Here in Queensland, the news media is currently accessing freedom of information legislation to identify the number of 'convicted killers' located in (typically low socio-economic) suburbs such as Ipswich and Logan. Media and public agitation for longer sentences and less parole, both reflects and reproduces neoliberal punitive policy. It also supports the neoliberal agenda not just by discrediting the Welfare state, but by dehumanising those who depend upon it.

Calls for getting tough on criminals often reach fever pitch when particularly heinous and violent crimes are reported in the media. In the interests of attracting audiences and advertising revenues through sensationalist and morbid crime reporting, the mainstream media typically misrepresents the nature of crime and punishment. (See the recent American film *Nightcrawler* (Fox & Gilroy, 2014) for a popular culture exploration of these themes). Moreover, conservative commentators, journalists and politicians who profit from playing to public fears about crime, contribute to a moral panic and dehumanising discourse around convicted criminals. When high profile perpetrators are transported to maximum or high security prisons, Australia's tabloid news media is typically already there, with perverse morality tales about locking up 'monsters' and 'throwing away the keys.' Complex human beings, responding to difficult social and cultural contexts, are (mis)represented in this discourse as inherently, irredeemably 'evil' deviants or delinquents.

Women in protection units in particular, are frequently demonised in our society as both the perpetrators and victims of abuse, especially if they don't fit easily with gender roles and stereotypes of submissive femininity. In many cases however, their life 'choices' and chances are driven by factors they cannot control and did not choose. It is worth noting for example that characteristics of female prisoners typically include histories of childhood sexual abuse and re-victimisation as adult victims of sexual assault and domestic violence (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015). Even more than male prisoners, female prisoners suffer from poor mental health, substance abuse issues and low educational attainment (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015). Of course all citizens have some agency and individuals must be held accountable for their actions and (bad) decisions. However, society must be accountable too, if offenders emerge from prison even more isolated and marginalised than when they went in.

Privatisation and the business of punishment

As in the United States, incarceration is an expanding and increasingly privatised business in Australia. While the United States has the highest number of prisoners held in privately operated (corporate) prisons, Australia actually has the highest proportion of prisoners (19 per cent) in privately operated prisons in the world (Mason, 2013). Australia's first private prison was established in the state of Queensland in the 1990s and today 24 per cent of Queensland prisons are privately operated (Mason, 2013, p. 6). Victoria currently has the highest proportion of privatisation at 33 per cent, however this lead is likely to be overtaken by Queensland as the Queensland Commission of Audit (cited in Alexander & Martin 2013, 32-33) recently recommended that, 'the management of all correctional facilities in Queensland' should be opened to a 'contestable market' to ensure 'value for money.' Australia-wide there are eight corporate or private prisons currently operating, managed by GEO Group Australia, Serco Australia, G4S, and GSL Custodial Services (Alexander & Martin 2013, 32).

This privatisation trend is linked to the global ascendency of neoliberal ideology over the past twenty years and cutbacks to the public sector and state services generally. Prisons are historically secretive, isolated places and relatively little is known about the everyday experiences of our own incarcerated students in the context of these shifting tides of privatisation, and digitisation. We do know that incarcerated students are at risk of being left behind in the network society. Moreover, an increasing emphasis on vocational training has collided with the digitisation of tertiary courses to further limit access to higher education for prisoners. Certainly incarcerated students today face a unique set of challenges which need to be discussed further.

Incarcerated students: Invisibility and exclusion

Due to their imposed isolation and disconnection, incarcerated students are the virtually invisible and silent tertiary population subgroup of the eLearning age, unavoidably absent from emails, electronic learning

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management systems (like Blackboard), web course tools, online social forums, electronic course evaluation surveys and online peer support networks. Prisoners' relative invisibility extends to national educational equity and access policy and discourse. As Bedford (2007, p. 126) pointed out in his study of Australian prisoners' educational disadvantage, 'Prisoners, per se, have never been identified as an educationally disadvantaged group in Australian national educational policy formulation or implementation.' Where prisoner education is mentioned at national public policy level it is typically framed in the economistic language of rebuilding wasted human capital, often through vocational training. Prison education is at the sharp end of the neo-liberal trend toward reinterpreting all education as learning measurable practical skills for employment.

Despite having experienced multiple and severe social and economic disadvantages, individual Australian prisoners are not eligible to access the same publicly funded allowances available to members of other equity groups (Bedford, 2007). Although prisoners are paid for their labour, it is not enough to cover the costs of studying for a degree. While privatised prisons in Australia support self development and education in principle, in practice there may be fundamental contradictions between utilitarian profit motives and the more humanistic goals of higher education. Hence contemporary prisons, like contemporary universities, are cloaked in contradictory discourses and practice architectures. They speak the language of openness, access and educational opportunities within the limits of economic rationalism and neoliberal institutional practices.

Australian prisons operate in accordance with international human rights conventions under legislation and principles which provide access to education as a basic human right. In principle, both private and state run facilities value education as a cornerstone of successful social integration, rehabilitation and re-entry. In practice however, incarcerated students may not receive the time, space and technology necessary for equitable or comparable participation in higher education. Moreover, neoliberal and utilitarian approaches to education typically frame higher education, in the humanities especially, as a luxury rather than a realisation of human rights. The competing priorities of the (post)modern

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prison are perhaps most evident around access to higher education and access in opposition to security. While correctional centres must attend to their core business of maintaining order and control, these same security measures have undoubtedly made access to technology enhanced learning within prisons complex and difficult.

Like other Australian students, undergraduate incarcerated students have access to the federal government's Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) which allows them to defer the cost of their higher education fees and pay later through the taxation system if and when their income reaches a threshold level. Although this scheme allows low socio-economic background students to enter the university system while incarcerated, it does not cover the prohibitive costs of text books, printing or hiring a lap top from the correctional centre. This means many incarcerated students from low socio-economic backgrounds who start an undergraduate course will find it difficult if not impossible to complete without financial support from sympathetic family members. It also means they acquire a debt which they will eventually be required to pay back if employed upon their release. Incarcerated students are aware their study materials are not always comparable to those available to students outside prison and are often frustrated by the lack of direct and instant email access to lecturers and by broken links or blank spaces where internet links, YouTube videos and other multi-media resources should be. They are also frequently frustrated by long delays in receiving university course materials, only to find these materials are not always appropriate or adaptable to an offline study environment. Lecturers may require wide reading and research skills without realising that accessing university library books and journal articles from a prison is often a difficult and lengthy process. Even the most highly motivated incarcerated students may find their education programs interrupted from unpredictable lock downs and transfers between centres. Along with many other burdens, prisoners will carry a HECS debt, if they fail to complete and leave it too late to withdraw from their undergraduate course. Still, many prisoners who start out determined and optimistic often give up because studying undergraduate university courses while incarcerated is increasingly difficult and frustrating.

A prison tour: The pains of imprisonment

While most academics are familiar with tenets of inclusive pedagogy and strive to meet the needs of diverse learners, relatively few are aware of the extreme and multiple barriers faced by incarcerated students. Ironically, most lecturers in law, psychology and criminology have not actually visited or even spoken to their incarcerated students and do not know them as individuals negotiating a very complex and difficult learning environment. University lecturers are often not fully aware that they have enrolled incarcerated students in their courses unless they are contacted by a corrective services education officer (in those instances when the incarcerated student has some access to an education officer to speak on their behalf). Incarcerated students do not fit easily into the 'equity and access' approaches of most tertiary student services. They are mostly male and suffer a form of social and cultural dislocation, although not always from non-English speaking backgrounds. Incarceration is not technically a disability, although many incarcerated students struggle with mental health issues. Unlike other remote distance education students, incarcerated students without direct access to the internet cannot participate in online support forums, electronic orientations or electronic assignment submission. In the main, incarcerated students are invisible and silent in the digital university – they are as 'ghosts' in the machine of mass, post-secondary education.

Of course, in the context of neo-liberalist reforms of the tertiary sector, wherein the passion for individualised learning can be easily overtaken by demands to work longer and harder across larger groups and multiple forums, overworked teachers can hardly be blamed for overlooking their absent incarcerated students. Ryan (2012) satirically compares conforming Australian academics, reeling from relentless performance pressures, to exhausted and overcommitted 'zombies,' sapped of the energy for innovation and activism. While modern academics may be subject to 'zombiefication' (Ryan 2012) from overwork and increased surveillance, it is nothing compared to the neoliberal control technologies endured by their incarcerated students. To extend the horror stories further, prisoners have been labelled and stigmatised in the wider culture as society's 'monsters' and this perception undoubtedly makes it difficult for real incarcerated students to claim the unfamiliar and privileged identity of university student, and all the benefits that go with it. Moreover, incarcerated students are most vulnerable to various technologies of control imposed by neo-liberal policies and priorities. In a punitive, competitive post-welfare state, wherein economic participation requires educational credentials and digital access, prisoners are right to ask: who will be there for them?

Undoubtedly creating alternative learning tasks and assessments for disconnected incarcerated students adds further to heavy academic workloads. The complex, slow and difficult business of teaching incarcerated tertiary students also does not fit easily into most modern university business models. Within a mass, postsecondary education machine, shaped by rationalisation and monetarisation (Ryan, 2012), incarcerated students may be seen to represent an expensive problem. It takes time and money after all, to handle exceptions, develop alternatives and provide appropriate specialised materials and pathways.

Part of the problem for incarcerated tertiary students is that access and support varies greatly from prison to prison, provider to provider and course to course. Some incarcerated students have access to their own lap top, while others must book a session on a shared PC in the library, at times when they have permission to move between blocks. Although access to technology is more often more limited in 'protection' and other high security units, it can be down to 'luck of the draw' whether incarcerated students receive the advice and resources they need to complete their course, assuming they have chosen a course they can complete in prison in the first place. Courses that require field work, practicum or residential on campus attendance cannot be successfully completed while incarcerated. Similarly, students may not be permitted to undertake some Information Technology and Chemical Engineering courses due to the potential threat to prison security and internet access issues. Incarcerated students tend to gravitate toward business, arts, human services and law. Due to professional registration requirements, such as criminal history checks, incarcerated students may be discouraged from undertaking some courses such as education and medicine. There is a fine line however between career advice which is realistic and that which is discriminatory, especially against a backdrop of increasing vocationalisation wherein prisoners may be discouraged from undertaking higher education altogether and directed instead toward more 'realistic' trade certificates.

The limited and ad hoc support many incarcerated students receive, from both prisons and universities, would be considered unacceptable and perhaps discriminatory if applied to other equity groups in other educational contexts. In an information age, incarcerated students clearly need current, consistent and appropriate information and tailored pathways from universities. They cannot be left to their own limited and often uninformed 'choices' and thrown back upon their own resources, or

the resources of their family. Incarcerated students are very often highly motivated, tenacious and adaptable individuals, they have to be to get through a degree behind bars. Nonetheless, there are limits to how self-managing, mobile and entrepreneurial a student can be while incarcerated by the state! Universities (and governments) need to step into the breach to close the gap for the most marginalised of students, the incarcerated, as they would for any other disadvantaged group.

As most prisoners have not completed year 12 secondary schooling, they tend to come to tertiary study through tertiary preparation pathway (TPP) or bridging courses offered by universities through distance education. These TPP courses typically still supply printed materials along with embedded, holistic and specialised support for incarcerated students. That is not always the case however when incarcerated students graduate to undergraduate study. Again it can be down to 'luck of the draw' and the choice of discipline as to how sensitive undergraduate lecturers are to the needs of inmate students. Minimum standards of communication and course materials should be consistently extended to the teaching of all incarcerated students at all universities, with course coordinators fully aware of incarcerated students and informed of their particular needs. Educators who support incarcerated students must in turn be clearly and consistently supported, with time, resources and training. Providing alternative learning experiences could, for example, entail providing course resources on a CD/DVD to incarcerated students, although it also requires recognition that in some instances incarcerated students in some units will not have reliable access to a computer at all and will still need hard copy study books and printed texts. Where possible and where acceptable to the state correctional departments, universities should also support academic and support staff visiting and tutoring their incarcerated students.

At the moment and at the very least, university teachers and course developers need to consider the needs of incarcerated students, who are mostly still offline, when choosing digital sources, digital texts and digital methods. Incarcerated students also require more flexible assessment due dates and institutional flexibility generally to allow for unanticipated and unpredictable disruptions to their study schedule, such as offender lock downs and transfers or turn-over of education centre staff. Many incarcerated students cannot afford textbooks and face long delays when ordering library books and course materials through the mail. Hence universities should supply textbooks for popular courses to prison libraries

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or at least hold adequate copies of required texts at their own libraries for the designated use of incarcerated students. Even English dictionaries are in short supply at some centres and appreciated by incarcerated students. Many incarcerated students in private prisons will also be required to work designated hours in industry, with limited time to study after hours. On top of this, incarcerated students commonly deal with drug and alcohol dependency issues, depression/anxiety and poor physical or mental health which may require medication which makes it difficult for them to concentrate.

Of course these are obstacles, barriers and constraints which may also be experienced to some degree by low socio-economic background students on the outside as well. This leads to another issue incarcerated students face which is implicit discrimination and stigmatisation. University staff are not necessarily immune from the widespread assumption that incarcerated students are somehow less deserving of scholarships, resources and attention than other tertiary students. A common misunderstanding is that prisoners, unlike other distance education students who must balance family, work and study commitments, have 'all the time in the world' to study while sitting in their cells. In reality, many prisons are typically noisy, crowded and sometimes hostile environments not conducive to study. Prisoners are also often subject to compulsory behaviour modification training, transfer and court dates which can derail their tertiary study schedules and make it difficult to pick up where they left off. In private prisons some incarcerated students may spend their days working in industry and their evenings too tired, distracted or medicated to study effectively.

A holistic and humane approach to tertiary teaching recognises that students are emotional beings who need encouragement and support, not just technological access and basic skills. It is ideal if some of this support can be provided face to face, person to person, in real time. Incarcerated university students in particular often struggle with pre-existing mental health issues (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012) and the added psychological distress that may arise from isolation from family and community, overcrowding, bullying and harmful influences from other prisoners. Moreover, if 'the high rate of mental health disorders in prisoners may reflect, among other things, a lack of adequate diversion options in the community' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012) it is likely this is another contributing factor brought about by cuts to the welfare state.

Prisoners as people, clients as students, teachers as change agents

Of course, it ought to be recognised that many university academics and operational support officers are currently working hard to design and deliver a comparable and equally accessible learning experience for their incarcerated students in the new digital environment. Similarly, committed and dedicated education officers around Australia are printing course materials, emailing lecturers and facilitating access to higher education for prisoners every working day. Progress has been made in addressing the digital disconnection of incarcerated students. The problem is educators are at times losing ground to the shifting tides of monetarisation, privatisation and vocationalisation in both prisons and universities. Without adequate intervention and against a backdrop of neoliberal reform, the incarcerated student appears as the captive 'canary in the coalmine,' indicative of the unintended effects of wholesale digitisation. For better or worse, the incarcerated student remains the antithesis of the neoliberal ideal of the constantly connected and mobile citizen.

While course enrolment numbers look good on paper for the more progressive and image conscious post-Fordist prisons, and for the universities that supply them with courses, the real challenge is getting incarcerated students successfully through these courses by supporting their transitions through and beyond study. Encouraging vulnerable individuals to enrol and leaving them to flounder without adequate resources is setting them up to fail (again), doing more harm than good. Where a tertiary course is offered, course coordinators must work closely with prison administrations to meet students' educational needs. Prisons are deliberately difficult places to penetrate and it takes some understanding, knowledge, patience and perseverance to negotiate the various restrictions and administrative procedures required of academics who wish to enter. Teachers should also expect finger printing, criminal history checks and x-ray surveillance before visiting incarcerated students. However, universities and academics must continue to build relationships and partnerships with correctional centres and with individual correctional centre education officers, in order to adequately support incarcerated students. Incarcerated tertiary students need reliable, consistent and current access to information and information technologies and universities have a key role to play in this process. In a (post)modern networked society even temporary disconnection from digital networks can lead to chronic

social exclusion. Working around security constraints to educate prisoners is increasingly time consuming and expensive, but wasting their potential as students and citizens will be more expensive in the long run for society as a whole.

Incarcerated students also need academics who are responsive, committed and empathetic teachers, willing to support all students fully, at a distance and, where possible, face to face. Despite the tyranny of distance, time and performance measures, it is important to remember that all students are more than bits on a screen, digitised grist for the institutional mill, or worse, ghosts in the machine. Like other stigmatised and marginalised individuals, incarcerated students ask first to be seen and to be seen as whole persons. As much, if not more, than any other underrepresented group, incarcerated students deserve the immeasurable benefits of higher education.

Structure vs agency

It is important that public discourse around prisoners is not driven by simplistic, sensationalist narratives of revenge. It is also important that the academic conversation around reducing recidivism is not hijacked by an economistic focus on 'human capital.' While mastery of trade and technical skills is important, it may be more important in these uncertain economic times to provide skills in critical thinking and reflection on the social world. The first step in facilitating successful rehabilitation is recognising the 'offender' as a human being negotiating social, cultural and political contexts.

Teaching in prisons can be a confronting but transformative experience. I recall for example, introducing a group of incarcerated students to the sociological concepts of structure and agency. Listening to these students talk through the relevance of these ideas in their own lives, I was reminded of the empowering potential of education. There are some things we cannot choose, like the dead weight of the past. But even in a prison, especially in a prison, there is still the potential for social change and self-determination.

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