

Mind the gap! Bridging correctional settings with tertiary education for inclusiveness of detainees in the education system – a case study in Mauritius

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ABSTRACT

Education serves as a fundamental pillar enabling the settlement of members in a society. However, vulnerable groups like ex-detainees are sometimes left behind, owing to their socio-economic or demographic characteristics. Upon release, they need certain tangible and intangible resources, failing which they may return to prison. Empowering this vulnerable group with essential social capital, utilising a social inclusion approach, can equip them and decrease recidivism. This case study examines the implementation of an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) undergraduate degree programme within a correctional facility in Mauritius, making formal tertiary education a reality in the carceral setting. Following a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Open University of Mauritius (OU) and a correctional facility in Mauritius, this unique project enabled selected detainees to pursue a degree while being detained. With the support given inside the facility, they managed to complete the programme while abiding by all security protocols. Subsequent interviews conducted post-release revealed that the degree significantly contributed to their successful resettlement into society by opening doors to good job opportunities and contributing to their financial success. Thus, an education system that promotes the inclusion of vulnerable groups like detainees can significantly contribute to achieving a part of the social capital required post-release.

Keywords: ODL and detainees, social inclusion, inclusion of detainees, resettlement.

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INTRODUCTION

The prison environment is fundamentally recognised as a facility where individuals are confined under legal authority due to their criminal actions. Incarceration inherently results in the forfeiture of certain fundamental human rights. What do those human rights encompass, though? While the right to freedom of movement is the biggest forfeiture, detainees still have some fundamental rights. For instance, the standard minimum rules determine that each country has to ensure that its prisoners get a decent education. As much as possible, the education options offered have to resemble the external offer (United Nations, 1955). However, this might not be the case in all detention centres around the world. Pillera (2015) argue on the role of education and its link to offending and re-offending to draw the connection between education and decreased recidivism. And this can happen by accepting and including them in society. Social inclusion is the ability to "participate in the key activities in the society in which

they reside" (Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths, 2008). This means including the disadvantaged populations equally so that they have equal access to opportunities and resources to participate in society. Achieving social inclusion fundamentally relies on the relationships and interactions, referred to as social capital that individuals cultivate within their communities. Education plays a crucial role by equipping individuals with the essential social capital needed to secure a livelihood and sustain a healthy social value. Education is thus believed to be a key element in addressing recidivism issues. With the restrictions governing the movement of detainees, the prison system precludes inmates from attending traditional colleges or universities to pursue their desired degrees. This is where universities that offer courses through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode can bridge the gap. Such a mode of learning offers the possibilities of flexible learning, transcending physical barriers, allowing the learner to learn at his pace and

place.

Study context

The study context is the island of Mauritius, located in the Indian Ocean. With a population of around 1.3 million people, the World Prison Brief (2025) website (www.prisonstudies.org/country/mauritius) reports that Mauritius has 2655 detainees as of 31.01.2025 and 11 penal institutions, including one in Rodrigues Island. The Crime Digest Report (2022) shows that out of every 100 adult convicted detainees admitted to prison in 2022, 75 were re-offenders who had been imprisoned in the past, and 64 were imprisoned more than once in the past. The Mauritius Prisons Service (MPS) is the main institution that caters to the welfare and rehabilitation of detainees to ensure their mainstreaming in society. It provides delivery of prison services using resources provided by the Mauritian Parliament with maximum efficiency. Most of the courses are known to be vocational and provided in-house by officers in the field. There are, however, no records of formal education at the tertiary level within the carceral setting. This study is focused on one of the MOUs that the MPS had with the Open University of Mauritius (OU) to provide formal tertiary education to their inmates. OU is a public university established by an act of Parliament, offering courses through the ODL mode, thus allowing students to study at their own pace and place. Students have access to learning materials for all the modules in the programme once they register. They are then the master of their programme by learning at their own pace and completing the programme with all the flexibility in place. With the blended mode, they can also benefit from sessions that provide opportunities to interact with tutors. This study thus debates the praxis of open universities and the extent to which they are open and flexible to allow people behind closed walls to benefit from education.

Aim and objectives

This study aims to describe the process of implementing a tertiary education programme in a correctional facility, and the objectives are to:

- Describe the administrative process of initiating and implementing the process.
- Identify the challenges and benefits from an institutional perspective.
- Explore the challenges and benefits of the programme from the detainee's perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education is widely recognised as a key driver of socioeconomic well-being. Yet, access to education is often constrained by the extent to which systems are open and flexible in accommodating vulnerable populations. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights declares: 'Everyone has the right to education.' Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is the provision of distance education opportunities in ways that seek to mitigate or remove barriers to access, such as finances, prior learning, age, social, work or family commitments, disability, incarceration or other such barriers (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020). As such, for detainees, education should be regarded not merely as an opportunity but as a right. However, its implementation varies across different countries. Antonopoulou et al. (2022) present what different parts of the world are doing regarding formal/tertiary education in other parts of the world. They highlight the example of Sweden for having one of the most innovative prisoner education programs, where all prisons comprise a training centre. Each centre has one or more teachers equipped with a computer room, while inmates have access to more than 130 areas of education. In Britain, the Open University implements a "virtual campus" program in prisons, where inmates have access to e-learning materials. Cornell University in America implements imprisonment programs. But the student prisoners do not get permits to attend classes; instead, the University goes to jail. While there are debates on the approach to offering these programmes and the various resistance from other countries, what remains the main concern is how formal tertiary education could equip detainees with the social capital needed once they are released.

Social capital is a complex, multidimensional concept encompassing a repertoire of cultural and social value systems (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009). The authors further argue that different authors have defined and used the term in different ways; however, most converge around the fact that they emphasise social relations that generate productive benefits. According to Rogošić and Baranović (2016), the theory of social capital views capital as the resources contained in social relations. Mikiewicz (2021) argues that social capital is a resource that an individual has access to through networks of relationships with others. And that education and its expansion can be seen as a tool for raising the level of civic participation, strengthening political activity and increasing and building a participatory culture. Mikiewicz et al. (2011) argued that education fosters social capital by strengthening networks, trust, and civic engagement, with comparative evidence from Poland and Iceland, highlighting how inclusive learning environments can enhance individual and community resources essential for social integration. Education is hence a form of social capital that can help individuals connect to society (for example, the labour industry) to acquire a job and contribute to self, family and society development. Acquiring this form of social capital is hence a valuable asset to connect to society once detainees are out of prison. It provides them with a mechanism that can help them settle back and be included in society as a contributing member, and not a dependent member. Li (2007) explains how social capital can be conceptualised in three dimensions: neighbourhood attachment, social networks and civic participation. Therefore, looking at the process of acquiring education from a social

inclusion approach becomes imperative as it can allow members to feel a sense of belonging to a community, have strong ties with people and the ability to participate in the community. Research often explains social inclusion through definitions of social exclusion. Social exclusion reflects the failure to tackle risks faced by vulnerable people in complex societies and does not have a universal definition. However, many authors have tried to define the term, and Cedeño (2023) came up with this one: "Social exclusion is a multidimensional process..." (economic, societal, political, cultural that is characterised by a deficit view that focuses on vulnerabilities (e.g., family conflict, unemployment, and factors listed by SEU, 2004). The author redefines social inclusion as a spectrum rather than a binary (excluded/included) and emphasises that inclusion should be conceptualised as a developmental process that evolves. It is not only a dichotomy, meaning individuals are either excluded or not excluded. It influences the lives of individuals and families who find themselves in social disadvantage. Therefore, social exclusion creates more risks for the vulnerable group to become marginalised from the wider society, exacerbated by the lack of social policies targeting this group (for example, unemployment, low skills, illness, low wages, and old age). Social inclusion policies can therefore counter such risks to problems that vulnerable people, like detainees, face when they are released, and one such issue is unemployment and a lack of required skills.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a case study approach, which Creswell (2014, p. 241) defines as "a qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. Priya (2020) emphasises that the case study methodology enables in-depth exploration of real-world phenomena, allowing researchers to capture complex processes, contexts, and interactions, making it particularly suitable for examining the implementation of educational programmes within correctional settings. The case(s) are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time." To further strengthen the case study, the single case design is adopted and the descriptive approach is used, which Yin (2014) explains as "describe' a phenomenon in detail in its real-world context" and is a widely used approach in sociology. As a case study does not aim to generalise findings, the rigour and clarity of steps involved and depicted (Yin, 2014) in the case, if well-presented, ensure reliability and validity. To proceed with this research, the strategy is based on the study aims and objectives, a detailed description of data collection techniques, clearly formulated research questions, well-formulated guidelines for the analysis of the data, and the reporting of the case findings. Based on this study's aims and objectives, the university files are consulted for secondary data. For the primary data, resource persons

such as the programme manager, the university tutors and the inmates who benefited from this programme have been interviewed. To select the tutors, convenience sampling was used to reach those who are accessible. For the inmates who completed the programme, past data obtained from the MPS indicated that they would be released within 5 years after programme completion. One of them was in contact with OU and was selected under the framework of convenience sampling. The data are then analysed to understand the process followed by the university, the facilitators and challenges encountered by resource persons (programme manager and tutors), and how these can impact the life of the detainee once released into society. The interview with each participant (the programme manager at OU, two tutors and one ex-detainee) lasted for around 1 hour, and the answers were noted. After the interview, the answers were read back to ensure that the right answers were captured. Thematic analysis was used to extract the salient themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Objective 1: Evidence from files and documents

OU, in collaboration with the MPS, organised a ceremony at the training school of Beau Bassin on 22nd August 2013, where two detainees were offered a scholarship by the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Science, Research and Technology. It was expected that with such an initiative for the detainees, they would not only receive the necessary skills and expertise but also be empowered for a new start in their lives. With a recognised degree from the OU, they would likely find jobs as easily as other candidates in the market or start their own enterprise once they have served their sentence and integrated into society. However, this posed a huge challenge for the OU, detainees, and the correctional services. Due to the stringent security measures in Mauritian prisons and limited access to external information, the detainees would have found learning overwhelming if not properly guided. To provide the necessary support for successful outcomes, an appropriate plan was devised in consultation with different stakeholders after several meetings to establish a modus operandi for the smooth delivery of the programme within the confines of one local detention facility. As the focus of the OU is on distance education and blended learning, this greatly aided in the program's delivery. An induction session was held with the learners to prepare them for the experience of ODL as well as the basic principles of study skills. Consequently, the detainees were provided with specially designed self-learning printed manuals and notes at the start of each academic semester, along with an electronic tablet. In addition, the prison staff helped them maintain contact with the Programme Manager at the OU, tutors, and submit assignments. To facilitate learning and bridge the feeling of isolation among the detainees, tutors regularly

visited them within the correctional setting for support. In parallel, an online tool called WizIQ allowed the detainees to communicate in real time with the tutors who were kilometres away. The OU also arranged for examinations to be conducted in the prison under the same conditions as for other candidates. All these initiatives ultimately proved to be a blessing, as the academic performance of the detainees was above average.

Research Objective 2: Institution challenges and benefits

Following the MOU in 2013, three detainees were selected by the MPS to follow a BSc (Hons) Business Management from the OU. The detainees were all from the category of those who had a sentence of more than 20 years and who had the minimum academic requirement to be enrolled in an undergraduate course. At the time they were offered the scholarship, they were near the end of their sentence, with around five to 6 years left. From an institutional point of view, the main challenges were access to the correctional facility, academic progress follow-up and administrative procedures. Correctional settings have a certain way of running their administration, and giving way to a university to enter their premises was challenging. The programme manager had to seek approval from the relevant authorities to seek permission to enter the prisons and bring tutors as well. This also necessitated paperwork to arrange for special settings to enable the detainees to interact with the tutors. Courses being on a blended mode included some face-to-face interactions with tutors, such that students gain the opportunity to ask questions about the difficulties they encounter. As detainees did not have the opportunity to have an internet connection and free browsing permissions, special arrangements had to be made so that they could be connected to internet platforms such as WizIQ to follow classes. Despite these numerous challenges, the programme manager reported that this was a learning curve as it gave the institution the possibility to explore an avenue that no other public university had done. The sense of accomplishment was even more profound when the detainees showed continuous dedication towards their studies.

Two tutors were also interviewed to explore the challenges and the benefits encountered. The tutors expressed feelings of anxiety and fear when they learned that they also had to visit the correctional setting to deliver lectures to inmates. They reported that since this was a new environment to them, the place felt hostile, and they were apprehensive of the new environment and behaviour of detainees towards them. However, officers from the correctional facility briefed them before they went there, reassuring them of the conforming behaviours the detainees are expected to abide by and the security in place. Moreover, the tutors were advised not to get too involved with the detainees and to focus on teaching and learning only. Also, the tutors were reassured that whenever they came over to

the prisons, some officers would remain around to ensure their security. The tutors were pleasantly surprised by the friendly behaviour of the detainees, making the teacher-learner relationship enjoyable and peaceful. The detainees also reportedly had already read all the notes before the class (as expected in a traditional ODL course) and mainly asked questions when the tutors visited them. This approach made the teaching and learning process very engaging, resulting in good grades obtained by the detainees. The tutors nevertheless reported that the detainees did not have much access to the internet to look for notes to complete their assignments; therefore, assignments were customised to enable them to rely more on manual and notes than internet sources. Overall, with the existing manual, notes, support from OU tutors and officers from the correctional facility, the detainees fared well in their studies. To the tutors, this exposure was an excellent opportunity to be empowered with skills that would benefit them upon release.

Research Objective 3: Detainee's challenges and benefits

To the detainee, the opportunity to study for an undergraduate degree was met with intense happiness. After spending nearly 15 years in prison, there was a feeling of being 'obsolete' and uncertainties about future career prospects upon release. This opportunity was seen as an answer to those uncertainties and a dream coming true; however, it was also accompanied by apprehension. To undertake studies years after leaving college and years inside prisons did not seem easy. But this was taken as a challenge to overcome the uncertainties of what the future holds without any formal educational qualifications. They were provided full support by both the prison officers and OU. The tutors treated them with respect and dignity, enhancing the tutor-student relationship and encouraging them to engage well in their studies. They had more time compared to traditional students, and the arrangements there allowed them to study from 09:00 to 16:00. This enabled them to remain focused on their studies. Challenges observed were access to the internet to dig for further notes. In the first year, they only had access to three hours of internet per week for study purposes, for which they had to move to a training centre in another area within the prison setting. To reward them for their outstanding performance in their first year, the internet was brought into the prisons in a study room in their second and third year of studies. They also participated in all examinations (special sessions in the prison) under good conditions. They served as role models for the next batch of detainees who started a course and helped them with their first-year modules. However, some challenges were noted. As detainees, they could not imagine what life is like outside, and this resulted in more theoretical knowledge than practical. After serving the sentence, the degree was useful to secure a job and to connect to society. However, having a tagged certificate of character posed barriers. The participant recalled

situations where he was not selected because of the tagged certificate. After some struggles, the participant was offered a job by an employer who did not question his character. Today, the participant claims to be happy and settled and thanks the OU and government for this laudable initiative of bringing tertiary education to the prisons.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Leaving a correctional setting after years of detention may result in an exit with very few or no resources. From a socioeconomic perspective, an individual needs resources, disputed as social capital in this study, to settle into society. In this case study, these resources (like education) are seen as the social capital needed to connect to society. Correctional settings should thus be equipped to provide a range of educational opportunities to detainees, and open universities can be a vital partner to bridge the gap between the correctional centre and society. With opportunities offered by open universities, such as ladder courses, open and flexible learning, and online and face-to-face support, universities can bring tertiary education to correctional settings without compromising the protocols of the prison's security system. For such openings to happen, efforts are needed at all levels. There is a need to expand access to higher education in prisons by formalising partnerships between correctional institutions and universities, ensuring that programmes are sustainable and scalable. Macro-level policies that foster MOUs between correctional settings and tertiary institutions are needed; the mode of offering programmes should be adapted such that those behind the walls can also benefit from educational programmes of their choice, and education should be seen as a human right, surpassing the walls of the prisons. Institutions, both educational and correctional, should devise mechanisms to support in-prison tertiary education. This includes delivery options and settings that favour good teaching and learning environments. In line with the recommendation of Stamatiou et al. (2022), this study also concurs that there is a need to introduce new technologies and digital services that allow e-learning within correctional settings. This would allow detainees access to the internet, but would be limited to what the prison security system can allow. For example, limited browsing sites, no personal email identities, and under other relevant rigid frameworks. Such initiatives can put detainees on par with the students in the community, such that both groups are subject to more or less the same learning opportunities. The policies can also strengthen support structures for detainees, including mentoring, counselling, and career guidance, to facilitate both academic success and reintegration into the labour market. But the effort should go beyond by adopting policies that review the certificate of character issuance and management to stop all forms of stereotyping against ex-detainees. There is a need for enhanced post-release support, particularly in addressing employment discrimination linked to criminal records, to

ensure that education translates into genuine opportunities for inclusion. These combined efforts could bridge the gap and create a more inclusive society, where inclusiveness does not just exist as a concept but is also evidenced in practice.

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