

Dr Brian Gordon
Principal Research Officer
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee

Submission: “Making our Prisons Work”: Inquiry into the efficiency and effectiveness of prisoner education, training and employment strategies.

Dear Sir

Thankyou for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. My name is Brett O’Keefe and I am the Gardens Manager at Hakea Prison. I was made aware of this Inquiry only recently and am encouraged by its terms of reference. The Gardens Team at Hakea facilitate and deliver a significant amount of vocational training comprising nationally accredited modules leading to Certificate ii of Horticulture, along with nationally accredited short courses. This is achieved through several avenues, such as, undertaking Traineeships under the AMA Apprenticeship Centre and TAFE delivering the “off the job” component with the Gardens Officers delivering the “on the job” component. Additionally “student contact hours” and “recognition of prior learning hours”, supplied by TAFE, are utilised to assess prisoners that have been employed within Hakea Gardens for an extended duration. Along with this, as a qualified Horticulturist and Trainer and Assessor, I, with my team, conduct in-house vocational training and assessment under ASETS, (ASETS being the Departments Registered Training Organisation). To quantify this, in the past twelve months we have achieved, four prisoners completing Cert ii of Horticulture (RPL Hours), eleven prisoners completing an accredited short course (chemical handling under RPL hours), four prisoners attaining eight modules of Horticulture (half the cert ii course, under ASETS) and currently have six prisoners enrolled in traineeships. This has been a good result given that we have faced a number of challenges the past twelve months, along with Hakea being a remand prison with a transient population.

A positive initiative was implemented by Mr Ray Chavez, from EVTU (Education & Vocational Training Unit), some years ago. This involved training gardens officers from metropolitan prisons in Certificate IV Training and Assessment. One of the aims of this initiative was to give prisoners the opportunity to commence horticultural training at Hakea, continue that training upon transfer to Casuarina and allow for completion at a minimum security facility. The main reasoning behind this was the presence of a horticultural industry at all facilities Whilst I welcomed and embraced this initiative, due to a number of factors, this process has fallen down and currently lacks any continuity. One of the factors influencing this is the limited assistance, guidance and resources made available to Vocational Support Officers working at the coal face. This challenge applies to all prison industries across the state, not merely the horticultural industries and certainly not just pertaining to education and training alone. Whilst there are two public servant positions at head office (one primarily

responsible for obtaining contracts and the other responsible for industry support), this appears to be insufficient to cater for all prison industries across the state. Additionally, in hindsight, the EVTU should possibly have taken a more proactive stance in assisting VSO's and monitor the process and progress to ensure success of this initiative.

Additionally, there appears to be a misguided view amongst some of the Departments middle management, that production and training are incompatible. This is a misconception, as production and training are quite mutually compatible. This can be demonstrated through my own workshop's achievements of an 18% increase in market garden production this financial year along with a significant increase in vocational training and successful completion of modules/certificates by prisoners. Furthermore, industry and vocational training enhances the skill level of the workforce allowing for greater quality of goods produced and increased overall productivity. Additionally, the Departments own "Industries Policy", calls for "normalised employer/employee relations between industrial officers and prisoners", along with reflecting real life workshop scenarios to "achieve a business like environment". It also calls for "a complimentary approach between work programs and vocational education and training programs". Similarly the four cornerstones of prison management adopted by the Department lists custody and containment, care and well being, rehabilitation and reintegration and reparation. With an appropriate level of assistance given to vocational support officers, along with greater communication between branches and individuals within the Department, this is a vision that theoretically should be easily attainable.

I have recently held very positive, preliminary discussions, with Mrs Helen Baron-St John (Project Manager, Review of Offender Employment) and Mr Larry Smith (Manager, Prisoner Employment Programs) in reference to accessing assistance and involvement in the Prisoner Employment Program (PEP). This is a very positive and proactive program initiated by the Department. One example of what can be achieved through this is an experience I had with a prisoner some time ago. This prisoner had completed Certificate ii of Horticulture and commenced Certificate iii. This prisoner displayed a genuine interest in his course of study and had done well in his vocational achievements. Due to this and his impending release, when he approached me for assistance in gaining employment I was happy to accommodate him. I arranged for an interview (at the prison) with an Aboriginal Agency which ran a production/retail nursery. This resulted in him gaining employment with this agency upon his release. The last I heard of him was that he was a supervisor at this nursery, assisting with the training of others.

There are a range of policies/initiatives referencing training and education already in place within the Department that allow for greater achievements and successes that are currently being realised. Whilst I am encouraged by the formation of the prisoner employment program, we still have a long way to go to realise what can be achieved.

In summation, there needs to be a range of initiatives implemented to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of prisoner training, education and employment. These include (but not limited to) the following.

- A more coordinated approach between branches/divisions
- A structured framework to allow for a coordinated approach
- Better recruitment and retention of suitably qualified VSO's
- A more proactive approach in filling vacant VSO positions
- Greater level of assistance available to VSO's
- Greater level of staff training and development available to VSO's
- Better communication between VSO's and policy makers
- Better communication between VSO's and Project Managers

If I can be of any further assistance or should you wish to seek any clarification please feel free to contact me.

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