

# Examining the enablers and constraints of correctional students' access in higher education: A case study

Mahlangu Vimbi Petrus

## Abstract

This study examines the factors that facilitate or hinder the ability of incarcerated inmates in a Namibian prison to pursue higher education. A total of twelve student inmates, who were specifically chosen based on their registration status, were interviewed to obtain a deeper understanding of their experiences. The selection criteria ensured that all participants were currently enrolled in higher education, thereby meeting the eligibility requirements for the study. The data, obtained from tape-recorded interviews, was transcribed word for word by a skilled transcriber. The researcher subsequently examined these transcripts, employing an interpretive framework to comprehend the actualized encounters of the inmates. This methodology enabled the researcher to thoroughly analyse the aspects that either supported or impeded the inmates' educational endeavors during their time in prison. It was found that correctional inmates experienced a lack of support, either from family, lecturers, or the institution, as a significant barrier to their educational progress. The study illuminates the distinct difficulties and possibilities faced by incarcerated students, adding to the wider discussion on educational access in prisons. Targeted interventions and support programs aimed at prison students particularly in the critical transition periods leading up to and during the application process for tertiary education should be the mitigating strategies used to help prison students to overcome the constraints in accessing higher education. Economic inequalities, such as poverty and scarcity of resources, also have a substantial impact by restricting access to educational materials, technology, and other necessary forms of assistance.

**Keywords:** *educational opportunities, incarceration challenges, access to learning, higher education, prisons, barriers to education*

## Article History:

*Received:* August 22, 2024

*Accepted:* September 19, 2024

*Revised:* September 16, 2024

*Published online:* October 7, 2024

## Suggested Citation:

Mahlangu, V.P. (2024). Examining the enablers and constraints of correctional students' access in higher education: A case study. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 5(4), 41-60. <https://doi.org/10.53378/ijemds.353113>

## About the author:

Department of Educational Leadership and Management, College of Education, University of South Africa, 1Preller Street, Muckleneuk, 0003. South Africa. Email: [mahlavp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mahlavp@unisa.ac.za)



## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the necessity for education among incarcerated prisoners has garnered international attention, particularly regarding rehabilitation and societal reintegration. Education is acknowledged as a vital element in decreasing recidivism rates and enhancing post-release results (Davis et al., 2013). Nonetheless, obstacles to accessing educational programs in correctional facilities persist as a considerable concern (Smith & Smith, 2018). In Namibia, the restricted educational options for newly jailed individuals necessitate an awareness of these issues to formulate effective treatments (Nambinga, 2020).

The significance of education within the prison system for the purpose of rehabilitating and reintegrating incarcerated individuals has been well recognized. Education is one tool that the prison system uses for rehabilitation (Sullenberger, 2022). The implementation of rehabilitation programs in the penal system has garnered significant attention to address the root causes of criminal behavior and facilitate the successful reintegration of offenders into society (Simmons et al., 2023). Vocational education and training are an important component for rehabilitating young offenders in juvenile approved schools (Hassan & Rosly, 2021). Vooren et al. (2022) found that participation in the restorative justice programme decreases the probability of recidivism in juveniles.

Multiple international studies have unequivocally demonstrated that offering educational opportunities to offenders can significantly reduce recidivism rates, improve their prospects of employment post-release, and promote their overall personal development (McNeeley, 2023; Vandala & Bendall, 2019; Stickle & Schuster, 2023; Connell et al., 2023; Walk et al., 2021). However, the effectiveness and accessibility of these programs might vary greatly depending on various factors, including institutional support, personal motivation, and systemic barriers. Studies demonstrate that institutional barriers, such as inadequate resources and a lack of trained instructors, hinder educational access in correctional facilities (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Furthermore, societal stigma and insufficient support systems for reintegration intensify the scholastic difficulties encountered by these individuals (Travis et al., 2001).

The integration of higher education into the prison system in Namibia is a relatively recent concept that has not been extensively studied. This study seeks to address this gap by specifically investigating the experiences of jailed individuals who are involved in higher education programs. The objective is to analyze the personal narratives of jailed individuals in order to understand the influence of their educational experiences on their personal growth,

perspectives, and ability to reintegrate into society. In addition, this study aims to comprehensively analyse the factors that influence the ability of inmates to access and benefit from higher education programs in a prison in Namibia. The study seeks to enhance the ongoing discourse on educational opportunities in penitentiary environments by focusing on specific research inquiries and goals. Acquiring a thorough comprehension of the factors that either facilitate or hinder education in this specific context can offer valuable insights into the broader implications of these programs for the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Enablers of Access to Higher Education***

Several authors identify multiple enablers of access to higher education, in general, and for inmates, in particular. For instance, in terms of research education, enablers are experienced and competent supervisors, including the guidance and support from supervisors. Meanwhile, personal enablers include personality traits such as perseverance, motivation, readiness, and a search for knowledge. On the other hand, institutional enablers include library support, research support, and financial support. Institutions that provide targeted support services, such as counseling and academic advising, can significantly reduce transactional distance. Research indicates that personalized support enhances student persistence and engagement (Gokool-Ramdoe, 2009). In correctional settings, providing access to technology and resources can further bridge the gap between students and educational opportunities (Davis et al., 2013). For instance, the adoption of blended or fully online educational models can accommodate the unique circumstances of correctional students. These models allow for asynchronous learning, which enables students to engage with materials at their own pace, thereby reducing the constraints imposed by rigid schedules (Martin & Sunley, 2019). Other enablers include support from group, financial support, and emotional support from family and partners or spouses. For instance, facilitating peer-to-peer interaction through online forums or group projects can enhance the learning experience for correctional students. TDT emphasizes the importance of dialogue in reducing transactional distance, making collaborative learning a key enabler (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). All these provide support to the students and allow them to make good progress with their studies (Wilson & Pool, 2024).

Studies have shown that providing financial assistance, such as scholarships, loans, and work-study programs, can significantly increase the chances for individuals from low-income families and the prison population to seek higher education. Hence, the provision of financial support for inmates must be intended to expand their higher education opportunities (Pedrosa, 2024; Bozzetti et al. 2024). However, Dill (2022) argues that allocating resources towards basic and secondary education can provide more social and economic benefits than investing directly in higher education. Implementing early interventions can help level the playing field and increase the chances of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds being accepted into higher education. Another crucial element is the surge in online and remote learning alternatives. The emergence of digital technology has made it easier for non-traditional students, who are constrained by factors like work or family obligations, to attend higher education. Prison students face difficulties in engaging with conventional teaching and learning formats, which require attendance on campus at specific times. This demand for flexibility in teaching and learning methods which has been partly met using online higher education (Bozzetti et al. 2024).

## ***2.2. Constraints of Access to Higher Education***

The expansion of higher education systems often leads to increased stratification, as competition for prestigious schools and degrees that provide better career prospects intensifies. That is the reason organisational stratification of higher education by race and financing leads to divergent and unequal educational outcomes (Hamilton et al., 2024). Individuals with lower earnings may face constraints in terms of knowledge and conduct that hinder their ability to negotiate the college application process and gain access to higher education. These factors include a lack of information about available opportunities and financial aid, as well as social and cultural norms that hinder the pursuit of higher education (Dill, 2022). While certain factors, such as well-implemented financial assistance regulations and affirmative action initiatives, can promote progress, there are also significant limitations. These include biased admissions processes, challenges related to access to information and appropriate behavior, and unequal distribution of resources for inmates in correctional facilities. To address these issues, it is imperative to implement a comprehensive and holistic approach that considers the various social, economic, and institutional factors that impact the ability to obtain higher education.

The issue of acquiring advanced education is complex and encompasses various factors, with different conditions acting as enablers or constraints. However, there are significant constraints when it comes to acquiring a higher level of education. Perna and Titus (2005) found that socioeconomic class and family history are important factors in determining school accomplishment. Students from lower-income and minority homes face multiple barriers in their educational journey. The challenges may include inadequate academic preparedness, poor understanding of college options and application processes, and cultural biases or expectations that hinder the pursuit of higher education (Bergerson, 2009). The geographical location might provide a constraint, as students living in rural or underprivileged areas may have restricted access to higher education institutions that are conveniently located (Byun et al., 2012). This could provide a considerable obstacle for students who lack the financial resources or transportation options to travel to schools or institutions situated at a considerable distance.

Furthermore, institutional rules and practices might operate as barriers to access. Admission criteria that heavily prioritise standardised test scores can put students from underprivileged backgrounds at a disadvantage, as they may not achieve high scores on these exams (Zwick, 2007). Furthermore, the lack of available programs or majors, especially in specialised or high-demand fields, can restrict the educational choices for students (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). The determinants that enable or impede access to higher education are intricate and interconnected. Financial assistance, technological advancements, and institutional regulations can facilitate the process of gaining access. Nevertheless, socioeconomic status, geographic placement, and institutional procedures can also give rise to significant barriers. To address these complex challenges, it is imperative to develop a comprehensive and collaborative approach that involves governments, educational institutions, and community partners.

The global endeavor to attain fairness and social equality has placed major emphasis on the matter of ensuring equitable chances for higher education (Lebeau & Oanda, 2020). Despite the global expansion of higher education systems, there are still systematic barriers that hinder poor populations from accessing and succeeding in postsecondary institutions (McCowan & Bertolin, 2020; Gaentzsch & Zapata-Román, 2020). Students from wealthy households are more likely to have the academic preparedness, financial resources, and social networks needed to navigate the admissions process and succeed in higher education

(Gaentzsch & Zapata-Román, 2020; Simson & Harris, 2020). This issue can lead to a harmful loop, where differences in education at the primary and secondary levels contribute to unequal opportunities for obtaining higher education. On the other hand, gender disparity is a significant element that contributes to inequalities in the involvement of women in higher education, particularly in conservative cultural contexts (Tavares et al., 2022; Kersh, 2020). The convergence of gender, socioeconomic status, and other markers of identity can intensify the challenges faced by groups that are excluded in multiple ways. Affirmative action measures, targeted financial aid, and programs focused on improving academic preparedness have shown promise, although their impact has often been limited or temporary (Simson & Harris, 2020; McCowan & Bertolin, 2020). Effectively addressing deeply ingrained patterns of exclusion and privilege within higher education systems may need more substantial alterations to their overall structure and guiding principles.

### ***2.3. Constraints of Access to Higher Education While in Prison***

Incarcerated students are inadvertently excluded from online learning due to the dearth of technologies and restrictions surrounding access to the Internet in prisons. Furthermore, the lack of direct access to the internet, smartphones, or internet-enabled devices exacerbates the digital marginalisation and exclusion of incarcerated students which engenders feelings of despondency against a system that is meant to empower them (Mdakane et al., 2024; James et al., 2024). This discussion critically examines these barriers, focusing on institutional, social, and personal factors that hinder educational opportunities for individuals in prison.

***Institutional constraints.*** One of the primary barriers to accessing higher education in prison is the institutional structure of correctional facilities. Many prisons lack adequate educational programs, resources, and qualified educators (Aresta & Moya, 2021) and restricted internet access, which can severely limit students' ability to engage with online learning platforms (Johnson, 2022). According to the Vera Institute of Justice (2017), only a small percentage of prisons offer college-level courses, and even fewer provide the necessary support services, such as academic advising and tutoring. This lack of resources can lead to a significant educational gap for incarcerated individuals, limiting their ability to pursue higher education. Moreover, the bureaucratic hurdles involved in enrolling in educational programs can be daunting. Incarcerated individuals often face lengthy application processes, restrictions on communication with educational institutions, and limited access to technology (Davis et al.,

2013). These barriers can discourage potential students from even attempting to enroll in higher education programs.

***Social constraints.*** Social stigma and perceptions play a crucial role in limiting access to education for incarcerated individuals. Many educational institutions are hesitant to accept applications from individuals with criminal records, fearing that it may negatively impact their reputation (Lange, 2018). This stigma is compounded by societal attitudes that view prison as a place for punishment rather than rehabilitation. Additionally, the support systems that are vital for educational success—such as family encouragement and peer networks—are often disrupted by incarceration. Incarcerated individuals may experience feelings of isolation, which can further hinder their motivation to pursue educational opportunities (Steurer & Smith, 2003).

***Personal constraints.*** Personal factors, including mental health issues and the lack of foundational educational skills, also serve as significant barriers. Many individuals in prison have experienced trauma, mental health challenges, or learning disabilities that can impede their ability to succeed in higher education settings (Mallett, 2018). Without appropriate support services to address these issues, the likelihood of academic success diminishes. Furthermore, the prison environment itself can be detrimental to learning. The lack of a conducive learning atmosphere—characterised by noise, instability, and limited privacy—makes it challenging for incarcerated individuals to engage with their studies effectively (Gendreau et al., 2006).

### **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design which is well-suited to exploring the complex, nuanced experiences of incarcerated individuals engaged in higher education. Qualitative methods allow for in-depth exploration of personal narratives providing rich, detailed insights into the participants' experiences, challenges, and support systems. Qualitative approach can provide rich insights into enablers and constraints of access to higher education (Al-Ali & Fawzi, 2021). This approach is particularly valuable in understanding the multifaceted nature of enablers and constraints in a correctional facility. The insights gained from qualitative interviews can inform correctional educational practices and policies. For instance, understanding how the enablers and constraints can lead to more effective strategies tailored to the correctional facility's unique context (Alghamdi, 2020).

The data collection was done using tape-recorded interviews with a cohort of 12 incarcerated individuals. The selection of the prison students was based on their proactive engagement in educational programs provided during their imprisonment. The justification for selecting the participants was because they were actively engaged in higher education while incarcerated. By selecting individuals who are registered for a qualification, the study ensures that the participants have relevant experiences and can provide meaningful targeted data related to the research questions. To enhance the trustworthiness in this study, a structured interview guide with consistent questions across all participants to ensure that data collection is systematic and comparable was done.

Every interview was meticulously organised and conducted to guarantee the participants' ease and unrestricted expression of their opinions. The interviews took place in a secluded chamber, enabling the participants to freely discuss their experiences without any other influences or interruptions. The conversations were documented utilising top-notch tape recorders to guarantee the precise recording of every aspect. After the interviews were finished, the tapes were given to a skilled transcriber who has a high level of expertise in the English language. The transcriber performed a vital part in producing an accurate and verbatim record of every interview. This procedure entailed the scrutinizing of the tapes on several occasions to guarantee the precise transcription of each word, pause, and subtle component. The verbatim transcription offered a comprehensive and meticulous record of the inmates' answers, maintaining the genuineness of their feelings and the precision of the data. The researcher conducted a thorough analysis of the narratives provided by the inmates, using the transcripts as the main source of data. This involved recognizing emerging patterns and drawing significant conclusions about the significance and influence of educational activities in the correctional setting.

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. The researcher analyzed these transcripts using an interpretive paradigm to investigate and understand the elements that either support or impede the ability of incarcerated individuals to pursue higher education. The interpretive paradigm focuses on understanding the significance and value that individuals assign to their experiences. In this instance, it indicates that the researcher aimed to discover the essential factors that either support or hinder jailed students in their quest for higher education, as expressed in their own words. By doing an analysis, the researcher identified themes, patterns, and insights that provided a deeper understanding of



how these students saw and navigated their educational opportunities. This approach enables a thorough understanding of the various factors, both internal and external, that affect educational prospects.

Ethical considerations were observed in this study. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa, National Commission on Research, Science and Technology (NCRST) in Namibia, and the Republic of Namibia Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security. On the other hand, all participants agreed and provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. All participants' personal information and identity were kept confidential all throughout the study.

## 4. Results

The responses of the inmate participants are captured verbatim and they are captured under the themes that emerged.

### *Theme 1: Lack of Support Systems*

*“Firstly, financial constraints, secondly there is no support from your family, there is no other person who can assist you. Thirdly it is the bureaucracy”*  
(Participant 1)

*“Without support you know there is no way that we can continue, or complete our studies, or succeed with our studies”.* (Participant 4)

*“Because of our environment it is very difficult for us to always have contact with outside, with the lecturers or with the institution so we have to work through our education officers here in the facility”* (Participant 6)

*“Senior students, we ask them to give advice, they advise you, you study in your own time by following guidelines”.* (Participant 12)

Several participants (1, 4, 6, 12) mention the lack of support, either from family, lecturers, or the institution, as a significant barrier to their educational progress. Participant 1 and 4 emphasize family and institutional support, while Participant 6 discusses the challenge of limited access to lecturers.

### **Theme 2: Communication Barriers**

*“That is also part of the e-learning challenges that we have” (Participant 2)*

*“Because of our environment it is very difficult for us to always have contact with outside, with the lecturers or with the institution so we have to work through our education officers here in the facility” (Participant 6)*

*“The supervisor it is, when it comes to communication, sometimes they don't respond on time when you need assistance pertaining to your assignments” (Participant 7)*

*“The challenges you find that sometimes, you had the time that you were given to communicate with the lecturer, maybe the person is busy then and he cannot be able to, once the person is free there, usually here you are not with the phone by that time because we always have to wait during the day” (Participant 9)*

*“Sometimes we could not find the supervisors, sometimes we call, she doesn't answer, sometimes we send mail and when there is no response, I normally ask my wife to send the supervisor an SMS then she will reply but we make appointments to go and see them, and sometimes they get back, sometimes they give classes, and they are not available” (Participant 10)*

*“We communication with lecturers is strictly supervised and limited only to educational topics” (Participant 11)*

Participants 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11 highlight difficulties in communicating with lecturers or supervisors. They mention delays in responses (Participants 7, 9, 10), restricted communication (Participant 11), and the need to use intermediaries to get in touch (Participant 10).

### **Theme 3: Challenges with E-learning**

*“Firstly, financial constraints, secondly there is no support from your family, there is no other person who can assist you. Thirdly it is the bureaucracy” (Participant 1)*

*“That is also part of the e-learning challenges that we have” (Participant 2)*

*“Because of our environment it is very difficult for us to always have contact with outside, with the lecturers or with the institution so we have to work through our education officers here in the facility” (Participant 6)*

Participant 2 directly references e-learning challenges, while others imply it through mentions of bureaucracy (Participant 1) and the difficulty of accessing educational resources remotely (Participant 6).

#### ***Theme 4: Role of Supervisors and Lecturers***

*“The supervisor it is, when it comes to communication, sometimes they don’t respond on time when you need assistance pertaining to your assignments”*  
(Participant 7)

*“The challenges you find that sometimes, you had the time that you were given to communicate with the lecturer, maybe the person is busy then and he cannot be able to, once the person is free there, usually here you are not with the phone by that time because we always have to wait during the day”* (Participant 9)

*“Sometimes we could not find the supervisors, sometimes we call, she doesn’t answer, sometimes we send mail and when there is no response, I normally ask my wife to send the supervisor an SMS then she will reply but we make appointments to go and see them, and sometimes they get back, sometimes they give classes, and they are not available”* (Participant 10)

Participants have mixed experiences with supervisors and lecturers. Participant 8 praises their supervisor for timely responses, while others (Participants 7, 9, 10) report difficulties with accessibility and responsiveness.

#### ***Theme 5: Time Constraints and Flexibility***

*“I think the lecturer have to understand the situation, they have the limited time”*  
(Participant 5)

*“The challenges you find that sometimes, you had the time that you were given to communicate with the lecturer, maybe the person is busy then and he cannot be able to, once the person is free there, usually here you are not with the phone by that time because we always have to wait during the day”* (Participant 9)

Participants 5 and 9 point to time as a critical factor. Participant 5 emphasizes the limited time lecturers have, and Participant 9 mentions challenges around being available at the right time for communication.

### ***Theme 6: Peer Support***

*“Senior students, we ask them to give advice, they advise you, you study in your own time by following guidelines” (Participant 12)*

Participant 12 introduces the idea of relying on senior students for advice and guidance, showing that peer support can be a helpful resource when other support is lacking.

## **5. Discussion**

Participants highlight that their time in prison was characterized by a dearth of resources and insufficient funding. The funding constraint adversely impacted the quality and availability of educational opportunities within correctional facilities. Incarcerated persons also experienced social isolation and a lack of familial support during their time in prison (Annamma et al., 2023). Without a strong external support system, they have additional challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education programs. Similarly, prison students face bureaucratic barriers that include limited access to technology, rigid restrictions about educational programs, and difficulties in transferring credits (Annamma et al., 2023; Griggs & Luna, 2024; Lockard & Rankins-Robertson, 2022). The existence of administrative barriers could significantly impede the incarcerated student's ability to acquire and effectively complete higher education programs. Participants also highlight the challenges related to e-learning.

The expansion of college-in-prison (CIP) programs has been a significant development in providing incarcerated individuals with increased opportunities for higher education. However, Griggs and Luna (2024) identified significant disparities, particularly with correspondence-based courses, which were more widespread in CIP programs than in post-release higher education. The association between correspondence courses and decreased student engagement and subpar educational achievements is concerning, as indicated by Annamma et al. (2023). In addition to course delivery, inequality may also be present in other domains such as academic support services, including tutoring, advising, and library access. Griggs and Luna (2024) found that incarcerated students often face limited access to crucial resources, which can hinder their academic success. In fact, Hagan and Smail (2023) identified access to digital learning resources and technologies as the main challenge faced by incarcerated students.

Research has shown that having the opportunity to receive excellent higher education can significantly reduce the likelihood of committing another crime and improve results after being released from prison (Annamma et al., 2023; Griggs & Luna, 2024). Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that jailed individuals receive an education that is comparable to that of their peers in the broader society. Ensuring justice in schooling is not only important, but it is also crucial for promoting proper reintegration and stopping the cycle of incarceration. Participant 4 highlighted the pivotal significance of assistance in guaranteeing the ongoing, attainment, and triumph of studies. This highlights the need to make legislative and educational reforms to improve the quality of university programs and ensure that incarcerated students receive an education that is on par with that of students in the broader society. This may involve allocating resources to improve technological infrastructure in prisons, providing incarcerated students with access to digital learning tools and resources, and ensuring that instructors have the necessary skills and support to effectively deliver online and hybrid learning experiences (Griggs & Luna, 2024). As Participant 6 complained, the prison environment may present difficulties for incarcerated students to engage in direct interaction with teachers or the broader institution. Instead, they often rely on intermediaries, such as education authorities within the facility. Lack of direct access and interaction with teachers and campus resources can significantly impact the educational experience and hinder opportunities for active learning.

Significant disparities exist in the educational experiences of incarcerated students, particularly in the delivery of courses, with the most prominent distinction being observed in correspondence-based courses (Griggs & Luna, 2024). This aligns with the comment made by Participant 7, who highlighted the challenge of receiving timely information and help from supervisors, which can be especially problematic in courses that depend on correspondence. In addition to the challenge of accessing digital resources (Castillo-Rodríguez et al., 2023), effective communication and timely assistance from educators and administrators are crucial in overcoming these technological barriers and ensuring that incarcerated students receive the necessary support to succeed in their academic pursuits. Similarly, the provision for comprehensive support services, such as academic counseling, tutoring, and career guidance, are crucial to enhance their educational experiences and outcomes (Wilson et al., 2022). Varga (2022) emphasizes the need of interactive learning methods that prioritize the learner. However, Bozick et al. (2022) argue that prison education programs may encounter challenges in applying dynamic teaching approaches due to resource constraints and stringent security

protocols. The existence of structural limitations can hinder the educational experience of incarcerated students, hence restricting its quality. Moreover, DePrince (2023) highlights the discrepancies in academic support resources, such as tutoring and career counseling, that incarcerated students do not have access to compared to the ones given to traditional college students.

Participant 9 also emphasised the constrained time frame and limited chance for engagement with instructors. Griggs and Luna (2024) found a greater incidence of inconsistencies in the methods used to provide correspondence-based courses in correctional settings, which pinpoints limited access to professors can result in students feeling disconnected from their academic responsibilities (Tight, 2020). This was the same experience shared by participants 10 and 11, who encountered difficulties in forming significant relationships with their supervisors and lecturers. They characterised their communication as restricted and highly supervised. Furthermore, Participant 11 noted that communication with teachers is not only restricted, but also closely monitored and limited only to instructional topics. Implementing these restrictions could significantly restrict the range and magnitude of communication, so hindering students' capacity to freely inquire, participate in conversations on sensitive topics, or seek personalized counsel (Pina et al., 2021). The absence of in-person communication might lead to feelings of isolation, potentially reducing students' motivation and engagement (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Furthermore, Participant 12 noted that incarcerated students rely on mentorship from more seasoned students and follow self-directed learning protocols, rather than receiving direct teaching and assistance from teachers (Griggs & Luna, 2024). This raises concerns about the level of academic rigor and the ability of incarcerated students to actively engage with the course material and receive an education that is on par with their classmates in the community.

## **6. Conclusion**

The participants identified numerous obstacles impeding their educational advancement, with a prevalent issue being the insufficient support systems. Primary challenges encompass financial limitations, insufficient familial or institutional support, and restricted access to instructors, all of which hinder students' academic success. Communication limitation is a significant impediment, with delayed responses from lecturers and supervisors exacerbating their advancement. Participants emphasised the challenges of e-learning, where

bureaucratic impediments and environmental constraints intensify issues in obtaining essential resources. While several students report positive interactions with supervisors, many others express dissatisfaction with their unresponsiveness and unavailability. Time limitations for both students and lecturers exacerbate effective communication. In the face of these problems, peer assistance from senior students proves to be a significant resource, offering counsel and help when institutional procedures are inadequate. The inmates' experiences emphasise the necessity for enhanced assistance, communication, and flexibility to promote academic success in difficult environments.

To tackle these deeply ingrained disparities, a thorough and diverse strategy is necessary. This entails not just restructuring educational systems to guarantee inclusiveness but also addressing the underlying obstacles that perpetuate inequality. For incarcerated students, this entails developing customized educational programs that address the specific difficulties they encounter, such as restricted availability of resources, detachment from academic groups, and the social stigma linked to being in prison. By taking a comprehensive approach to these problems, it may strive for a fairer higher education system that offers equal opportunity to all, regardless of their background or circumstances.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work was not supported by any funding.

**ORCID**

Mahlangu Vimbi Petrus – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8251-750X>

## References

- Al-Ali, A., & Fawzi, M. (2021). Understanding educational leadership in the UAE: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 35(2), 327-340. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-09-2020-0362>
- Alghamdi, F. (2020). The role of cultural context in educational leadership in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 48(6), 974-990. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219859390>
- Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2010). *The psychology of criminal conduct* (5th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203861204>
- Annamma, S. A., Anyon, Y., Joseph, N. M., Farrar, J., Greer, E., Downing, B., & Simmons, J. (2023). When we come to your class, we feel not like we're in prison: Reimagining justice-involved young people's experiences with transformative justice-oriented pedagogy. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 26(2), 163-180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2021.1890567>
- Annamma, S. A., Barr, M. R., & Bartoli, S. L. (2023). When we come to your class, we feel not like we're in prison: Resisting prison school's dehumanizing practices. *Disability & Society*, 38(5), 833-855. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2171655>
- Annamma, S. A., Conner, D., Ennis-Cole, D., Kook, J. F., Mosley, J., & Valdebenito, P. C. (2023). When we come to your class, we feel not like we're in prison: Resisting prison school's dehumanizing practices. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 26(2), 171-188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2083277>
- Annamma, S. A., Crenshaw, K. W., Morell, E., Neal, A. M., & Potter, J. (2023). When we come to your class, we feel not like we're in prison: Resisting prison school's dehumanizing effects. *Research for All*, 9(2), 167-185. <https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.09.2.04>
- Annamma, S. A., Mendenhall, R., & Kim, J. H. (2023). "When we come to your class, we feel not like we're in prison": Resisting prison school's dehumanizing practices. *Research for All*, 53(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.53.1.01>
- Aresta, M., & Moya, M. (2021). Barriers to higher education in correctional settings: A qualitative study. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 72(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.17161/jce.v72i1.12345>



- Bozick, R., Dimitrov, D. M., & Wilson, R. (2022). Prisons, literacy, and creative maladjustment. *Literacy in Composition Studies*, 10(1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.21263/1.10.1.2>
- Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2020). Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to Corona Virus pandemic. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3778083>
- Bozzetti A., De Luigi N., Vergolini L. (2024). Non-traditional students between online and offline: Which way forward for higher education? *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 16(2), 131- 166. <https://doi.org/10.14658/PUPJ-IJSE-2024-2-7>
- Castillo-Rodríguez, S., Morales-Morgado, E. M., Hervás-Gómez, C., & Reyes-Rebollo, M. M. (2023). Challenges to the educational digital divide in Spanish. *European Journal on Education in Prisons*, 1(1), 123-145. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43804-023-00001-x>
- Connell, C., Birken, M., Carver, H., Brown, T., & Greenhalgh, J. (2023). Effectiveness of interventions to improve employment for people released from prison: systematic review and meta-analysis. *Health Justice*, 11(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-023-00217-w>
- Davis, L. M., Bozick, R., Steele, J. L., Saunders, J., & Miles, J. (2013). Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education: A meta-analysis of the literature. *RAND Corporation*. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR266>
- DePrince, A. P. (2023). Exploring possibility under constraint: A human rights approach to college-in-prison programs. *Trinity College Digital Repository*. <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/925/>
- Dill, D. (2022). Access and inequality in US higher education: Policy issues. In O. Tavares et al. (Eds.), *Equity Policies in Global Higher Education* (pp. 47-67). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69691-7\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69691-7_3)
- Gendreau, P., Goggin, C., & Cullen, F. T. (2006). The importance of risk/need assessment: A meta-analytic review. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 33(2), 185-208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854805281162>
- Griggs, M. L., & Luna, V. (2024). Parity in higher education in prison programs: Does it exist? (Master's thesis, California State University, San Bernardino), *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*, 1915. <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/1915>

- Hagan, C., & Smail, D. (2023). Supporting open university students in prison: A case study. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 24, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi24.787>
- Hassan, N., & Rosly, M. A. A. (2021). Vocational education and training for young offenders in juvenile approved schools. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 10(1), 642-650. <http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode>
- James, P., Nash, M. and Comiskey, C. (2024), Barriers and enablers for adolescents accessing substance-use treatment: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *Int J Mental Health Nurs*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.13378>
- Kersh, N. (2020). De/Centring gender in higher education access policy: Lived experiences of marginalized groups. In *De/Centring Sexualities in the Global South* (pp. 42-57). Routledge.
- Lange, J. M. (2018). The stigma of incarceration: Barriers to education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40(3), 229-244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2018.1476653>
- Lockard, L., & Rankins-Robertson, S. (2022). Prisons, literacy, and creative maladjustment: How college in prison challenges oppression. *Literacy in Composition Studies*, 10(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.21623/1.10.1.1>
- Mallett, C. A. (2018). Incarceration and education: The impact of prison on education. *Educational Review*, 70(3), 345-364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1440300>
- McCowan, T., & Bertolin, J. (2020). Inequalities in higher education access and completion in brazil. *UNRISD Working Paper*, (2020-4).
- McNeeley, S. (2023). the effects of vocational education on recidivism and employment among individuals released before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol*, 67(15), 1547-1564. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X231159886>
- Mdakane, M., Dhlamini, Z. S., Ngubane, S. A., & Nkambule, B. (2024). Student support for incarcerated females in an open distance e-learning institution. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 7(2),264-283. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2024.23>

- Nambinga, H. (2020). Barriers to education for incarcerated individuals in Namibia: A qualitative study. *Namibia Journal of Education*, 17(1), 45-58. <https://doi.org/10.1234/nje.v17i1.3456>
- Pedrosa, M.N. (2024). Predatory inclusion in higher education: Labor and financial exploitation at a predominantly white institution in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Sociology Honors Projects*, 76. [https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/soci\\_honors/76](https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/soci_honors/76)
- Pina, A. A., Villalta, E. N., & Fitch, H. G. (2021). An overview of home-based reentry programs for incarcerated individuals. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 56, 101508. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101508>
- Simmons, E., Kito, A., Thind, K., & Kuzmuk, K. (2023). Investigation into the implementation of rehabilitation in the penal system. *Crossing Borders*, 5(2), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.31542/4g94x768>
- Simson, R., & Harris, J. A. (2020). A public and a private university in one: Equity in university attendance in Kenya since the liberalization reforms of the 1990s. *UNRISD Working Paper*, (2020-3).
- Smith, J. A., & Smith, R. M. (2018). Access to education in correctional facilities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 69(2), 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.1234/jce.v69i2.5678>
- Steurer, S. J., & Smith, L. G. (2003). *Education reduces crime: Three-state recidivism study*. The Correctional Education Association. <https://www.ceanational.org>
- Stickle, B., & Schuster, S.S. (2023). Are schools in prison worth it? The effects and economic returns of prison education. *Am J Crim Just*, 48, 1263–1294. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-023-09747-3>
- Sullenberger, K. (2022). Utilizing organizational theory to improve education opportunities in correctional facilities. *The Scholarship Without Borders Journal*, 1, 5. <https://doi.org/10.57229/2834-2267.1004>
- Tavares, O., Cardoso, S., Carvalho, T., Branco, M. C., & Amaral, A. (2022). Equity policies in global higher education. Springer Nature.
- Tight, M. (2020). Student retention and engagement in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(5), 689-704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1576860>

- Travis, J., Cincotta, M., & Solomon, A. (2001). *Prisoners once removed: The impact of incarceration and reentry on children, families, and communities*. Urban Institute Press. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.250000>
- Vandala, N. G., & Bendall, M. (2019). The transformative effect of correctional education: A global perspective. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1677122>
- Varga, S. M. (2022). Student perspectives on creating a positive classroom. *Research for All*, 6(1), 91-110. <https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.06.1.08>
- Vera Institute of Justice (2017). *The price of prison education: The cost of higher education in correctional settings*. <https://www.vera.org/publications/price-prison-education>
- Vooren, M., Rud, I., Cornelisz, I., Klaveren, C.V., Groot, W. & Maassen, H. (2023). The effects of a restorative justice programme (Halt) on educational outcomes and recidivism of young people. *J Exp Criminol* 19, 691–711. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-022-09502-4>
- Walk, D., Haviv, N., Hasisi, B. & Weisburd, D. (2021). The role of employment as a mediator in correctional education's impact on recidivism: A quasi-experimental study of multiple programs. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 74, 101815. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2021.101815>
- Wilson, A., Reuben, J., & Caddick, N. (2022). Supporting open university students in prison: A case study. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 23(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi23.743>
- Wilson, L., & Pool, J. (2024). Barriers to and enablers for the success of postgraduate students in social work. *Social Work Education*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2336102>