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**PROJECT SNAPSHOT**

**Access to Postsecondary Schooling and the Credit Transfer Experience of the Incarcerated Population in Ontario**

**Type:** Research

**Project Number:** 2021-43 orR2143

**Project Lead:**Amadeusz

**Principal Investigator:** Tina-Nadia Chambers, Co-Investigator: Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad

**Collaborators:**Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning

**Project Summary**

This research project will build on the literature review by Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad titled Access to Post- Secondary Schooling and The Credit Transfer Experience of the Remand Population in Ontario which conducted an environmental scan of access to education for those in remand while incarcerated in Ontario, Canada and the work of Amadeusz, a not-for-profit organization that supports young people who are incarcerated to create positive change in their lives through access to education, community supports, mentorship, and exceptional care. This research project will interview Amadeusz post secondary stream of programming participants, young people between the ages of 18 to 35, on remand or recently released in Ontario to identify formal and informal pathways for education while incarcerated and opportunities or lack of it for transfer between post-secondary institutions for course credit for education completed while incarcerated. Interviews with participants who have been part of Amadeusz post-secondary stream educational program while incarcerated and key staff will take place.

To capture a range of diverse experiences, the key inclusion criteria is individuals who have participated in the past or currently in the Amadeusz post-secondary program. Interviewing both past and current participants and key Amadeusz staff and stakeholders will provide a holistic understanding of the complexities, challenges, and nuances involved in preparation, logistics, implementation, and enacting educational programs within correctional facilities with respect to strict institutional policies and practices and how we can work towards building/initiating a pilot program to make education more accessible with respect to pathways and credit transfer of students who complete education while incarcerated and/or post-release. Barriers will be identified based on lived experiences of the participants interviewed, and with findings from the environmental scan, will lead to discussions and recommendations for creating equitable access at multiple entry points for youth and young adults impacted by incarceration yet passionate about pursuing educational opportunities to better themselves and their circumstances.

**Project Rationale**

There is a lack of Canadian based research on the post-secondary credit transfer experience of the remand population in Ontario, its impacts, and recommendations. Based on the environmental scan, there is lack of pathways and prioritization for accessible education and supportive transfer between post-secondary institutions for those who have completed education while incarcerated. This will fill the research gap, support the advocacy of equitable access to education, and make recommendations for a pilot program to create a partnerships with multiple post-secondary institutions to have a clear pathway and supportive credit transfer for the remand population in Ontario.

**Methods**

Interviews were completed between April to June 2021. Participants were provided with informed consent outlining the project objectives and the steps involved. For those currently incarcerated, interviews were conducted over the phone and the number of questions asked as part of the interview varied to accommodate the limited time available ranging from 20 to 30 minutes. Interviews with Amadeusz program participants who were no longer incarcerated, Amadeusz staff and administrators, and post-secondary representatives were conducted remotely via Phone or Zoom in alignment with safety guidelines and protocols associated with COVID-19. The remote interviews ranged from 1-1.5 hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to further ensure anonymity as part of sharing quotes throughout this report. Interview responses were transcribed to facilitate coding and thematic analysis of the data. Participants had the option to drop out of the study at any point without any penalties by informing the lead researcher. No-one expressed wanting to drop out after completion of the interviews. Participants were provided with a $50 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation for their time for participating in the study.

Ethics approval was granted by Humber College’s Research Ethics Board. 25 key informants were recruited and interviewed via purposeful sampling through Amadeusz’s contacts and networks. Participants were divided into three groups:

1) Past and present Amadeusz education program staff (n=5).

2) Program participants (n=10) who met one of the four criteria outlined in final report

3) Representatives from post-secondary institutions (n=8) and jails (n=2) interested or involved in delivery of educational programs in incarceration facilities.

**Research Findings**

Finding #1: There needs to be an ideological shift about the purpose of incarceration facilities from being spaces that punish people by warehousing them to spaces that facilitate and promote rehabilitation. By extension, there is a need to disrupt deficit thinking about learners who are incarcerated and negative stereotypes about their potential and competencies.

Finding #2: Education needs to be treated as a right rather than a privilege. Education has to be prioritized to make it more accessible and meet the needs of individuals incarcerated for meaningful learning opportunities.

Finding #3: The physical space of jails needs to be altered with greater access to educational spaces, technology, and resources to facilitate optimal teaching and learning conditions. Particularly, there is a need to modernize and create greater access to computers and digital platforms to facilitate effective educational experiences.

Finding #4: There is a need to implement socio-culturally relevant and responsive curriculum content, pedagogies, and accommodations to better support learners who are incarcerated with consideration for lack of access to resources and technology for distance learning.

Finding #5: There is a lack of choices in the type of programs and courses offered that can be administered through paper-based correspondence. Learners who are incarcerated need more holistic services and financial support to optimize their learning and facilitate pursuit of education post-release with consideration for transfer pathways and costs.

**Future Research**

Once we are able to move forward developing and launching a pathway, we could look at evaluating it.

**Student Outcomes**

It benefits learners who are coming out of incarceration transferring to various post-secondary institutions. It was important to capture perspectives and lived experiences of individuals who accessed education while incarcerated or post-release. The objective was to better understand processes, challenges, and systemic barriers related to accessing education, particularly how to make improvements to ensure the human right of access to education is upheld by incarceration facilities and various levels of government.

**Institutional Outcomes**

1. Amadeusz should host forums and conduct further research to show the positive impact of access to education on learners who are incarcerated. Findings should be publicized and shared with various stakeholders to outline the social return in terms of taxpayer savings and how greater access to education leads to more effective reintegration and reduction in recidivism.

2. As part of prioritizing education as a human right, incarceration institutions should have a dedicated space or unit for schooling purposes. When on lockdown, people who are incarcerated should continue to maintain access to educational programs.

3. There should be greater access to computers, technology, digital platforms, and resources to facilitate distance learning and modernize conditions for teaching and learning. These can include dedicating greater spaces to teaching and learning such as a library and providing more educational materials. This also includes better access to computers, educational tools, and assistive-technology in a manner that is safe for conducting research, reading texts, and completing course assignments. All facilities should be upgraded to use video conferencing which would lead to more equitable participation in educational programs.

4. There should be greater staff and instructor training to deliver educational programs in a manner that is socio-culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining to the identities and lived experiences of learners who are incarcerated. Trauma-informed, anti-oppression, and decolonial practices (Battiste, 2013; Hanna, 2019) are recommended as part of pedagogies to be implemented for course content and delivery.

5. Post-secondary institutions should be mandated to have a number of programs and courses available in paper-based correspondence with academic accommodations for learners who are incarcerated.

Incarceration should be approved as a valid reason to receive accommodations which can be implemented as part of post-secondary institution’s Equity and Inclusion Strategies and Policies.

6. Learners who are incarcerated, both provincially and federally, should be compensated with an income for participating in educational programs to mitigate costs for enrolling into educational programs or courses. An income should be earned for completing educational courses similar to the Inmate Welfare Fund (IWF) program. IWF should be extended to include post-secondary schooling as it only applies to high school course completion.

7. OntarioLearn (https://www.ontariolearn.com/) is an online platform that supports credit transfer mobility and provides access to post-secondary courses (OntarioLearn, 2016). Create more awareness of OntarioLearn as a transfer mobility platform to help individuals who are incarcerated complete credits and transfer credits between post-secondary institutions including courses completed while incarcerated. Access to the OntarioLearn platform needs to be given on the inside via computers to help learners who are incarcerated access information about programs they would be interested to pursue, enroll, and how to transfer their credits.

8. There should be federal and provincial bursaries created for learners who are incarcerated. Amadeusz has begun to offer scholarships through their organization. Post-secondary institutions should have specific bursaries for the individuals who are incarcerated instead of grouping them under existing categories such as mature or low-income students. Post-secondary institutions should have a person of contact at their institution to support learners who are incarcerated.

9. A national funding organization, similar to the Laughing Gull Foundation in the United States which has a unique branch focusing on “Higher Education in Prison” (Laughing Gull Foundation, 2020), should be created that annually reviews proposals for programs and partnerships to improve access to education for individuals incarcerated. A committee should be created with representatives from various stakeholders to assess the applications based on clear criteria outlined and communicated in advance to the public. This will allow for innovative ideas, programs, and partnerships to be presented, assessed, approved, and initiated to meet the demands of greater access to education in incarceration facilities.

10. The creation of a pilot project coalition involving partnerships with various post-secondary institutions is recommended. The coalition would design, create, and implement a pilot program involving transfer pathways, courses, and support services to meet the needs and circumstances of learners who are incarcerated with consideration for their circumstances. Part of this program would involve Amadeusz existing case management post-release to ensure continuity of access to education and other relevant support services (e.g. securing housing and employment) to facilitate reintegration back into the community.

**Sector or System Implications**

As a collective, findings from phase 1 and phase 2 of the research project indicate that access to post- secondary education for individuals incarcerated remains limited and an under-developed sector in Canada. Organizations such as Amadeusz are leading the way but more funding and resources need to be allocated to prioritize education and expand the capacity of current programming as there is a demand for it. A holistic approach involving synergetic partnerships with organizations, agencies, and post-secondary institutions are required to revamp the system and prioritize education as a human right, as education is a significant protective factor in reducing recidivism. As Erzen et al. (2019) emphasize,

Yet while expanding access to excellent educational programs in prisons presents formidable challenges, it also provides an extraordinary opportunity to overcome inequity at a massive scale and to set an example— both for our own professional communities and for society as a whole.

Overall, this report outlines why the current system is inequitable and unjust, how systemic barriers limit access to quality educational opportunities, and how such barriers can be mitigated through a series of recommendations as next steps for moving forward. New improvements and changes in creating greater access to education and more effective transfer pathways will contribute to higher rates of rehabilitation and reduction in recidivism. This will contribute to government savings in monetary costs in the long term. The implementation of the proposed pilot project would be the next phase of this research. The introduction and implementation of a pilot project needs to be a collective effort involving all levels of the government in partnership with community organizations and post-secondary institutions.

