

Citation

For sustained leadership in embedding equitable, institution-wide support for incarcerated students, transforming access, academic inclusion, and reintegration pathways through collaborative and strategic partnerships.

Overview

Incarcerated students are among Australia's most structurally excluded learners, isolated not only by physical incarceration but by profound digital and social immobility (Farley & Hopkins, 2017). Before 2019, incarcerated students enrolled at Edith Cowan University (ECU) experienced fragmented and informal institutional support which relied largely on the goodwill of individual staff. The distinct educational needs of this small student cohort, from lack of digital access to institutional invisibility, were poorly understood, and no consistent or equitable framework for inclusion existed.

In 2019, Dr Fiona Navin recognised this critical gap and initiated the *Incarcerated Student Advancement Project* (ISAP) in direct response to what Farley and Hopkins (2017) describe as a parallel world of carceral education. Drawing on principles of critical mobilities and inclusive education, Fiona's leadership established the project's foundational vision and structure, embedding the needs of incarcerated students into Student Success strategy and university planning without requiring a dedicated prison outreach team. Her work recognised that ad hoc efforts were insufficient to overcome the structural exclusion these students faced. Fiona positioned ISAP not as an act of service delivery, but as a transformative institutional commitment to equity.

Building on this strategic foundation, Student Success Coordinators, including Caitie Terhorst, have driven operational and relational innovations that are central to ISAP's expansion and success. Caitie has led ECU's engagement with the WA Department of Justice (WA-DoJ), co-developed enhanced support for Prison Education Coordinators (PECs), streamlined consent-to-disclose and admissions processes, and contributed to the creation of tailored offline learning solutions for students. In supporting Student Success Advisers involved in case management for this cohort, Caitie's leadership has ensured these initiatives are implemented effectively. This work reflects the community partnerships advocated by Conway (2023), ensuring that incarcerated students are no longer passive recipients of policy but embedded within a responsive learning ecosystem. Through these collective efforts, ISAP has become an engine for deeper community engagement, supporting not just students but also their families, prison staff, and partner agencies.

At the academic front line, Dr Richard Hughes has provided sustained educational leadership within the School of Business and Law (SBL), ensuring ISAP principles are embedded in curriculum, teaching practice, and assessment design. Richard's work has involved mentoring colleagues, designing assessments fit for restricted environments, and advocating for systemic inclusion within SBL curriculum governance bodies. His contributions align with the call from Costelloe and Warner (2014) for prison education to reflect the values of adult education and life-long learning and viewing the incarcerated student not as an offender to be fixed but as a full citizen entitled to educational dignity and opportunity.

Together, the team has developed ISAP into a university-wide initiative that now supports the full incarcerated learner lifecycle, from pre-admission through to reintegration post-release. As outlined in *Histories and Philosophies of Carceral Education* (Harmes et al., 2022), delivering higher education in prisons involves navigating institutional contradictions and cultural barriers. This team's work embraces that complexity, drawing on theory, partnership, and practice to build inclusive teaching environments in one of the most challenging learning contexts imaginable. ISAP recent initiatives include removing the Student Services and Amenities Fee for incarcerated students. ECU is now positioned as a leader in carceral education, with ISAP demonstrating what can be achieved when sustained commitment, cross-sector collaboration, student advocacy, and a deeply inclusive ethos combine.

Statement Addressing the Assessment Criteria

Criterion A. Positive Impact on Student Learning, Engagement, and Experience

ISAP has transformed the educational experience of incarcerated students at ECU by embedding dignity, agency, and belonging at the core of their learning journeys. Grounded in the values of inclusion and equity, ISAP has supported 24 incarcerated students across multiple courses since 2019, with 64% of 188 unit results achieved at Distinction or High Distinction level. Ten students have graduated, two of whom have completed two ECU courses each, despite profound constraints on technology, mobility, and peer contact. In 2023, Michael, an incarcerated student, reflected on ECU's commitment to equity, saying: *"What surprised me was the lack of discrimination... I think ECU does a good job of that. For me, I had a good experience."* This success is not accidental. It is the result of ISAP's carefully scaffolded academic relationships, flexible assessment design, and institutional reforms that centre the learner, responding directly to what Farley and Hopkins (2017) describe as the immobility and digital disconnection of incarcerated students. *"I think study gives me a lot of self-worth and positive identity... Not very many people get that opportunity to restart,"* reflected Andie, an incarcerated student in 2023. Alex, another incarcerated student said in 2023: *"Being finally able to work on something challenging and constructive with long-term benefits was immensely satisfying and beneficial to my mental health and mood."* These voices affirm what Conway (2023) found in his phenomenological study: that the value of higher education in prison lies not only in vocational prospects, but in the restoration of purpose, confidence, and self-understanding; qualities essential to transformative learning. The tailored interventions of Student Success Coordinator Caitie Terhorst, and the customised assessments and mentorship of SBL academic Dr Richard Hughes, have been essential. In 2025, Aaron, a former incarcerated student wrote: *"Richard's nurturing of my academic abilities has realised significant psychological growth, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, all factors necessary to 'shed the skin' of criminality and move forward in life."* ISAP creates moments of academic joy and connection in the most constrained environments. Alex said in 2023: *"Instead of going down the wrong path that ended me in jail, I actually feel like I've gone back and taken the other path... I'm showing my family that no matter how low you get in life; you can always climb back up there."* The academic results and feedback from these students illustrate the life-changing impact of ISAP. ECU is not only changing lives but is realising what Costelloe and Warner (2014) describe as the deeper promise of prison education by treating incarcerated people as full citizens, entitled to meaningful learning and personal development. ISAP has set a high bar for how universities can extend the transformative power of education to those society has most excluded.

Criterion B: Recognition by Colleagues, Institution, and Community

In 2025, the team's work was recognised within ECU through the award of a Vice-Chancellor's Citation for Sustained Commitment to Enhancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In 2023, ISAP was referenced in presentations to the university's Equity and Diversity Committee and was commended for demonstrating how, without budget or bespoke resources, the team redesigned and implemented a whole-of-university response to a complex equity challenge. This systemic influence illustrates institutional recognition beyond individual support, embedding ISAP's principles in ECU policy and practice. In 2025, Andrea, a prison Superintendent discussed the practical partnership between ECU and her prison saying that incarcerated students have all the support they can get noting that in 2025, Aaron got *"the best results which obviously worked because he's come top of his class"* in addition to him winning two student prizes and a Dean's List citation. Face-to-face prison visits were pivotal in making these successes. Claudia, a former member of ECU's professional staff observed: *"I would leave each [prison] visit [with Richard] feeling like I had just attended a business symposium"* which reflects the quality of the student-academic engagement and learning that the academics pack into face-to-face ISAP prison visits. Sam Wagenaar, the External Partnerships Coordinator at WA-DoJ and Tertiary Studies Assessment Committee Chairperson wrote: *"ISAP has strengthened the working relationship between ECU and the Department. The team's willingness to engage openly with our people, understand operational limitations, and find realistic solutions has built a level of trust and cooperation that has real benefits for students and prison education staff alike"*. ISAP's benefits have also been recognised by

the families of incarcerated students. In a moving tribute to the work of ISAP, Peter, the father of an incarcerated student, wrote in 2025: *“I vividly recall your belief in [his] potential, even when he doubted himself... Over the years, your guidance and mentorship to my son...have had a profound and lasting impact on his and my life”*. These diverse expressions of recognition underscore ISAP’s reputation as a trusted and transformative model of inclusive education.

Criterion C. Creativity, Imagination, and Innovation

ISAP exemplifies creativity and innovation at the intersection of educational equity, systems design, and pedagogical practice. The constraints on incarcerated students that ECU academics need to work around were explained in 2025 by Sebastian a PEC: *“[The students] cannot use the internet unsupervised at all, so my job is really to go on the internet for them. They tell me what they want to look at or what they need to research”*. Thus, operating within the extreme constraints of the carceral environment, where students have limited digital resources, and with prison riots in 2021 affecting academic visits to ECU students, ISAP turned limitations into opportunities for inventive, student-centred approaches. These included the roll-out of secure digital distribution methods using Cloudstor and OneDrive, as well as offline academic integrity modules; creative solutions from Caitie’s team that helped maintain institutional standards without compromising accessibility. More recently, the use of Microsoft Teams from 2024 has enabled unit content to be pre-loaded onto prison education terminals via WA-DoJ infrastructure. These technologies have helped address a significant barrier identified by Farley and Hopkins (2017) regarding the digital immobility of incarcerated students. In 2023, incarcerated student, Michael, described the benefits of receiving all learning content *“in one hit... [which] significantly enhanced my autonomy and learning progress,”* enabling self-paced, dignified engagement with complex unit materials. More recently, the use of live Teams meetings between the student, PEC and ECU academic has pushed the boundaries of existing legislation prohibiting photography by applying prison approved mechanisms into education. ISAP has encouraged incarcerated students such as Alex and Aaron to work with academics like Richard outside semester time by blending Teams with OneDrive and sharing bespoke materials: *“The issue is access to education resources, such as computers and a PEC, during spare time... Since prisoners do have access to the [prison] Education Centre during uni holidays, there is a big opportunity for them to get ahead during this time”* said Alex in 2023. This was reinforced by Aaron in 2025 who began a research project which Richard arranged to span two units, saying: *“aware of the technological constraints in the carceral environment, Richard helped with supplying interesting and relevant academic articles, donating textbooks to the prison library, and encouraging me to achieve my full potential”*. This spanned research project enabled Aaron to achieve high academic goals while exploring a possible future identity as a postgraduate researcher. ISAP’s creativity also extended to bridging the university-prison community divide. For pre-parole day-release incarcerated students, site visits and informal on-campus meetings while accompanied by family have helped humanise the academic experience. One father, Peter wrote in about a prison visit in 2024 disrupted by security constraints and reflected on Richard’s work: *“You consistently went above and beyond, even walking through heavy rain... offering encouragement and support during challenging times.”* In 2025, Aaron said that this level of support was transformational: *“It is so encouraging to see my father smile at an ECU awards night or graduation, rather than attending another court appearance.”* In short, the team’s innovation and creativity reflect a compassionate, resilient, and context-responsive approach to learning design which is not merely adaptation; it is educational redesign rooted in courage, creativity, and a commitment to inclusion.

Criterion D. Use of Scholarly Literature in Practice

From the outset, ISAP has been informed by an evolving body of literature that reframes carceral education as a practice of empowerment, epistemic justice where incarcerated students’ perspectives are included in how we teach, and social inclusion. Rather than viewing education in prison primarily as workforce preparation or recidivism prevention, ISAP embodies what Conway (2023) describes as a civic-centred, student-informed vision; one that prioritises identity development, reflective inquiry, and the intrinsic value

of higher learning. This approach is echoed by McDevitt and Gellman (2024) who advocate for carceral education to be recognised as a humanising and community-building intervention, not just a corrective one.

ISAP's foundations were built on the work of Farley and Hopkins (2017), whose critical mobilities theory highlighted the profound spatial and digital immobility experienced by incarcerated students. In a university system increasingly reliant on digital access, ISAP has responded to these systemic exclusions through a suite of bespoke interventions to allow near-full educational participation including customised offline content, flexible assessments, in-prison tutorials, and consistent engagement via PECs and technology. These strategies do more than overcome logistical barriers; they operationalise institutional empathy and student-centred design, positioning incarcerated students not as future risks, but as present scholars and valued members of the academic community. Indeed, Costelloe and Warner (2014) provide a foundational critique of narrow, deficit-based education models that treat incarcerated learners as problems to be fixed. ISAP instead aligns with the author's vision of prison education as a right of citizenship and a form of lifelong learning, supporting the whole person and affirming their identity as learners. This is evident in ISAP's personalised mentoring, which encourages not only academic progression but also what McGloin (2022) describes as *epistemic agency*; the ability to contribute meaningfully to knowledge communities from positions of marginalisation. ISAP also reflects scholarly calls for relational and reflexive learning models including Ludlow et al. (2019) who argue for the development of localised, collaborative partnerships grounded in Freirean pedagogy (Grollios, 2016). ECU's approach mirrors this ethos. ISAP is intentionally built upon partnerships between academic staff, student support teams, the WA-DoJ, and local prisons to transform isolated goodwill into a coherent, strategic response. These relationships are not incidental; they are foundational, and designed to promote mutual respect, institutional courage, and shared responsibility for equity outcomes.

Through ISAP, ECU has shifted from aspiration to action, demonstrating how the principles of carceral education scholarship can be authentically translated into institutional structures. In doing so, ECU has not only supported some of Western Australia's most excluded learners, but has positioned itself at the forefront of inclusive, reflexive, and scholarly-informed practice.

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