Abstract

This study aimed to determine whether NSW prison officers who attempt tertiary education are confronted with any unique cultural and contextual impediments during their studies and, if so, the effects of these impediments. Focussed or semi-structured interviews were arranged with a total of sixteen officers and conducted face-to-face with each individual. The study also contrasts the experiences of commissioned and non-commissioned correctional officers.

Three major thematic strands emerged from the collected data. The first clear theme involves the learning barriers encountered by prison officers engaged in tertiary studies. These barriers include time constraints and time management, family commitments and, access to support mechanisms. The second major theme concerns the influence on the education process of the powerful occupational culture that has developed in the prison workplace. The third theme which was identified highlights the difficulties the occupation of prison officer presents for those individuals pursuing tertiary studies in the distance education mode. Geographically isolated work locations, a changing shift roster and high levels of job-related stress all conspire against the success of prison officers as ‘distance learners’.
INTRODUCTION

Lucien Lombardo’s 1981 study of prison officers in New York as an occupational group is attributed as the first full-length qualitative study of its kind on this subject. Lombardo described the work environment of the prison officer as laden with fear, mental tension, uncertainty, isolation, inconsistency and boredom. Ray Myers (1987) conducted a similar study in the context of the Australian prison system focussing on officers at Bathurst Gaol in NSW. Myers concluded that prison officers don’t trust anyone-workmate, inmate or visitor. He concludes that the boredom associated with the occupation and the vagaries of the promotional system were the significant factors in what he termed the prison officers’ ‘back stabbing behaviour’.

Myers is also the author of a paper entitled ‘The role of tertiary institutions in the development of the correctional officer’ (1988). He states that in the first decade of the Associate Diploma in Justice Administration at the (then) Mitchell College of Advanced Education there were 105 police and only 6 correctional officer graduates. There were also continuing difficulties filling the corrections strand of the course.

Myers (1987) study concludes that prison officers saw a tertiary qualification as ‘useful’ only in relation to promotion to executive rank. Most officers expressed no desire to proceed beyond the (non-executive) rank of Senior Prison Officer, and saw no reason to have to study to get there. Tertiary education was primarily viewed as a means to attaining an alternative career. Officers interviewed by Myers in Sydney claimed enrolment in tertiary studies actually counted against them in interview for promotion to non-executive positions, as officers interested in academic theory were deemed unsuitable for corrections work.

Officers interviewed by Myers who were engaged in tertiary studies complained that they had difficulties meeting tertiary commitments due to rostering arrangements and the sheer emotional exhaustion of the job. They also said they had trouble getting time off to study. These officers stated that the studies did relieve the ‘lonely, boring hours at work’ and provided them with some mental stimulation.

Historically, the NSW Department of Corrective Services has been highly resistant to the notion of correctional officer training and professional development. These issues were established as central to the reform of the Department in the findings of the Nagle Royal Commission in 1978. However, the introduction of higher
education into the training process was strongly resisted at all levels of the Department over the decade following Nagle’s Report. This is also evidenced by the fact that subsequent external industrial relations commission enquiries and countless internal reports also recommended such reforms to no avail.

The reforms which Justice Nagle first foreshadowed in 1978 effectively did not commence until the beginning of this decade with the establishment of the Corrective Services Academy and the Centre for Professional Development-Corrective Services (CPD-CS). Following negotiations with the then (University of New England - Northern Rivers) the CPD-CS was established in 1991. A tertiary level administration course was designed and developed with reference to the correctional environment. It comprised studies in finance, leadership and human resources and contained various perspectives of the prison as part of the criminal justice continuum. The course was delivered in the distance education mode, utilising written materials and audio tapes.

This facility was one of a number of partnerships between the University of New England-Northern Rivers (now Southern Cross University) and specific industry groups, designed to meet the precise service needs of that group and to cater to employees who were motivated to know more about their profession.

According to Treyvaud and Davies (1991), as an occupational group, prison officers have been identified as having little formal education (tertiary) prior to joining the NSW Department of Corrective Services. The nature of their employment (diverse work locations throughout the State, rotating shift work rosters, overtime requirements) and their workplace, which is often highly stressful and is not conducive to learning, conspire against the individual
attempting tertiary studies.

The studies of Myers (1987) and those of Philiber (1987) and Lombardo (1981, 1985) reflect a time when the infrastructure and support for tertiary education was non-existent in NSW. Since these studies were conducted there has been an absence of research on the professional education of prison officers. It is during this past decade when arguably the greatest advances have taken place. This study aims to determine whether NSW prison officers who attempt these studies are confronted with any unique cultural and contextual impediments and, if so, the effects of these impediments and the means they have used to overcome them.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Participants**

Two groups of eight prison officers were selected to take part in the study. The first group was made up of non-commissioned officers (up to the rank of Senior Prison Officer) who had been studying at or had completed the Associate Degree in Correctional Administration. The second group was drawn from the ranks of commissioned officers (from Assistant Superintendent to Superintendent Grade 1) who had completed the Graduate Certificate in Management, the Graduate Diploma in Management or the M.B.A. All of the officers who were identified had a minimum of two years enrolment in their respective courses.

There was a deliberate choice on the part of the interviewer to include a female officer and an officer from a non-English speaking background in each sample. Additionally, a balance was also struck in the sample between officers from metropolitan and regional locations, as the officers involved in CPD-CS courses are scattered throughout 29 work locations across the State.

Each informant was assured that their anonymity would be preserved and that the content of the interview would remain confidential. These assurances were made in order to encourage openness and honesty in relation to their accounts of their experiences and the attitudes of the Department and work colleagues in particular. Issues which were raised throughout the interview process which may have suggested a new theme or theory were tested with those informants who had previously been interviewed with follow-up questions, usually by telephone. All initial approaches to officers to participate in this study were successful and all interviews and follow-up interviews were conducted with complete co-operation.
The interviews

Focussed or semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face with each individual. The study is cross sectional (static-comparison) and careful selection of the time and the location for each interview was made. Notes were taken and where possible the interviews were also recorded on audio-tape. As some interviews were conducted within the confines of a prison where audio recording devices are not permitted, short-hand notes had to be relied upon.

The broad topic of the informant’s experiences of tertiary studies as a distance learner guided each interview. Specifically, the interviews were structured to include discussions about the context of each officer’s studies while working in the prison environment. Therefore the interviews covered such issues as the perceived benefits associated with their studies, the demands of the job and its effect on their studies and their experience as a distance learner in this context. The issue of the prison officer culture was the second major component which was discussed. In this case the discussion focussed on their treatment by colleagues, by the Department and their perceptions of the value and concept of tertiary education as a means of professionalising prison officers generally and for their own career in particular.

Some of the interviews took place at locations outside the actual environment where the informants worked. If they were interviewed in a prison, the interview took place in a private room with only the informant and researcher present. Considerable time was taken prior to each interview to place the informants at ease because the nature of the interview process asked them to critique/criticise their work location, colleagues, the Department and themselves.

The interview technique

During the period of the research, the researcher was employed as a Student Development Officer with the CPD-CS. The researcher was in regular contact with all officers enrolled in these programs and acted as a mentor/tutor/confidante in assisting them overcome the obstacles of distance learning and tertiary studies. The researcher routinely visited all of the State’s prisons and also counselled officers enrolled in CPD-CS courses over the telephone and in person at the Corrective Services Academy. In this context it could be said that the researcher was able to elicit honest responses from the informants, particularly by utilising a semi-structured conversational questioning approach. However, it is not known to
what degree many of these officers distrusted the researcher, who could be seen to belong to the Corrective Services Academy and, in turn, the hierarchy of the Department. While their responses were treated as anonymous and confidential, the interviews were conducted face-to-face, which could have restricted an individual from being completely candid.

The sample

The officers who were selected for this study all had a record of achievement in their respective courses and had completed the upper levels of the respective programs. These officers were selected as they had been engaged in their studies over several years and had encountered and overcome the various obstacles. It was envisaged they could more fully explain the experience.

However, another group of officers which could be selected from the one in three officers who withdrew from the undergraduate program or from the lowest levels of the post-graduate program may have revealed a slightly different picture. A study which involved those officers both commissioned and non-commissioned who have never participated in or had plans to participate in these programs may also shed further light on the apparent hostility of the correctional officer culture towards education.

LEARNING BARRIERS

Prison officers engaged in the CPD-CS courses have shared the frustration that is likely to be experienced by all adult learners who embark on distance education. These learning barriers include frequent and meaningful access to lecturers, time constraints and the need for supportive family arrangements.

Access to lecturers

The first theme which was emerged in the study involves the kind of general learning barriers which may have been encountered by prison officers as an occupational group.
Those officers engaged in the CPD-CS courses share the frustration that is likely to be experienced by all adult learners who embark on distance education. These learning barriers include frequent and meaningful access to lecturers, time constraints and the need for supportive family arrangements.

Firstly, regular and meaningful access to the designated Associate Lecturers is a common problem for prison officers. Non-commissioned, often junior officers who are attempting the course feel intimidated contacting associate lecturers for what they believe is trivial advice:

*For junior officers doing this course it is difficult to contact the lecturers sometimes because they are very senior people like Governors. You feel like you can't just ring them up and bother them about an assignment.*

This situation is made more difficult, in particular, for those officers enrolled in the Associate Degree, as the associate lecturers are all senior Departmental Officers with acknowledged expertise in their subject areas. However, contacting very senior officers in a para-military rank structure is something they would never have occasion to do in the normal course of their duties. This situation adds a further dimension to the usual reluctance of all adult learners to ask for help and identify that they need assistance.

Studies undertaken by Holmberg (1990) and Gottschalk (1996) emphasise that student teacher contact is critical to the success of the distance learning process. They conclude that motivation and regular feedback which is timely and detailed is directly attributable to regular student-teacher contact. Without this contact the psychological ‘distance’ of the learning process is increased.

**Time constraints**

In most cases the officers who were interviewed for this study said they tried to study during down-time whilst at work. This occurred frequently during night shifts when the inmates were locked in their cells. However, if their work routine didn't permit such a study regime the pressure of time was often immense. Interestingly, an opinion was also expressed that the higher an officer’s rank the easier it was to study at work because they can delegate and re-arrange their working schedule:

*I also found B watches (night shift) very conducive to study. Because the gaol’s asleep and you have periods of an hour to half an hour where you might be sitting talking to your mate or reading a book or doing nothing. I used to get stuck into the study. When I was promoted to night senior the workload I had became greater and I had to cut back on my study time. But as a first class on B watches I got between 1 and 3 hours in each time. ‘A’ watches (day shift) were no hope and ‘C’ watches (afternoon shift) were hard to study on too.*

*The higher the rank the easier I believe these course become. Senior officers have access to computers and they're not in the face of the inmates all the time. Their security issues are more dissipated. They are in a position to*
delegate things to other officers. They have access to resources and they know a lot of the Associate Lecturers as friends.

The additional pressures of regular shift work and an ever-changing work roster are a continuing barrier for prison officers attempting the courses. Principally, it prevents them from maintaining a regular study routine.

Time constraints and time management as key impediments for the adult learner. This situation is even more pronounced for non-commissioned officers whose base salary is very low and who come to rely on the extra income provided by working regular overtime. These officers freely acknowledge that working overtime would always take precedence over their studies.

Supportive family arrangements

Both groups of officers involved in the courses agreed their studies placed considerable demands on their domestic lives and that supportive family arrangements were an essential ingredient for success. In this regard the experience of correctional officers could be said to be no different from those of any other distance learner:

"I was lucky, my daughter’s grown up and married, it’s just my wife and I and I looked at this as really something I could do out of interest. The younger guys—their problem is kids, overtime, shiftwork and it’s harder to find the time.

I’m lucky because all my children are grown and I get no disturbance from them. My wife is a teacher in TAFE College and she also understands I need peace and quiet."

When family arrangements made the study process more difficult, the officers had to readjust their routines if they were to be successful:

"I’ve got a young family. Certainly their needs weren’t met while I was doing the MBA. My wife doesn’t have any kind of academic background - so she didn’t really understand my needs.... My routine in the end was to stay back at work and study after I finished for the day."

A common ingredient for success at the highest levels of the courses appears to be relative freedom from family commitments. The majority of officers interviewed for this study had either mature aged or no dependent children and they acknowledged that this was a key factor in their allocation of time for their studies.

The pressure to balance family, work and study is a common theme throughout the literature on adult education. The studies of Jegede and Kirkwood (1994) and Kember et.al (1994) concluded that workplace and family support both played a significant role in an individual’s success. The high stress nature of the prison workplace which is described by Lombardo (1981) as being laden with tension fear and uncertainty adds a further dimension to this dilemma.
What higher education means for the occupation

When both groups of officers were asked to reflect on the long-term value of their studies and what they mean for the occupation there was a marked contrast in their responses. Among the non-commissioned officers who were interviewed there was a sense of hope that the courses provided them with personal growth and that they felt they had become better officers as a result:

If someone kicks this off early in their career hopefully it will complement their skills along the way. I mean operational skills. Before I started doing this I couldn’t put an essay together. I now go into meetings with the executive of the gaol and I feel like I can hold my own. I feel like I’m on a par with them. They can’t throw a task at me now that concerns me. I know I can handle that side of the job. Preparing assignments and thinking about the stuff in the modules gives me the skills to handle what comes along. That’s a gradual thing, you don’t realise your writing skills or your thinking skills are improving but they are.

It is ironic that this group of officers who have confronted so many difficulties in order to succeed only to find themselves marginalised and often unrewarded for their efforts are quite positive when they reflect on the value of the experience and their achievement. The resistance they faced from the occupational culture and the lack of support from their local management has galvanised their resolve.

Conversely, the feeling among commissioned officers was not so optimistic. In most cases it could be best described as ambivalent.:

I don’t really know where I stand on educating prison officers. I always remember what McGeechan (Dept of Corrective Services Chief Executive in the mid-1970's) said about education at the (Nagle) Royal Commission. He said there was no use over-educating the prison officer because an educated prison officer asks too many questions- and that’s no good in this job. Education doesn’t necessarily make a better officer, experience and common sense make you. Let’s face it, this is a job people fall into, no-one ever wants to be a prison officer, even if you end up staying in the job, you probably tell yourself you’ll do this until something better comes along.

The commissioned officers who were interviewed appear resigned to the fact that professional education has its limitations. The professionalisation the Department hopes to achieve can only occur if structural changes such as links to promotion and enhanced recognition for the qualifications are available for those who complete the courses.

There is also a feeling that the nature of the work of the prison officer is such that enhanced educational opportunities will not solve what are inherent occupational difficulties. Ultimately, work experience and a flexible disposition may be a correctional officers’ most valuable attributes.
These comments are closely aligned to the conclusions reached in the literature. The officers who were interviewed were confident that their own career prospects may have been enhanced through their studies, however, they expressed the view that the structure of the profession and the system of promotion were serious impediments to the widespread acceptance of the education process. It was apparent that their shared view was, until these aspects of the profession were addressed, the education process actually had the potential to cause further frustration and disaffection, as officers are not properly rewarded for their efforts and the culture continues to persecute them as a group.

According to Regoli, Poole and Shrink (1979), Cullen et.al (1985), Hepburn and Jurik (1986) and Philiber (1987), the introduction of a process of tertiary education for an occupation such as prison officer is most likely to have an overall negative effect. These studies concluded that despite the initial hope that is generated by the credentials, the workforce is ultimately divided, as the nature of the entry requirements mean many are not capable of successfully completing these studies. This leads to cynicism and divides the occupation. Those who are successful expect more from what is essentially a very limited occupation and this process leads to increasing job dissatisfaction.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE FACTORS WHICH IMPEDE LEARNING

The second theme which emerges in this study is the workplace reaction from colleagues towards those officers who are engaged in tertiary studies. These reactions can be quite explicit and range from dismissive remarks and ridicule to physical intervention in the form of destruction of mail between the CPD-CS and the distance learner. These reactions are symptomatic of a workplace culture which refuses to embrace professional education because of previous poor experiences of formal education and strong feelings of self doubt.

**Workplace reaction to studies**

The workplace pressures described by the informants in this study take many forms and are not just restricted to disparaging remarks. Both the commissioned and non-commissioned officers who were interviewed acknowledged this barrier:

*There’s a lot of poo-hooing(sic) about it- they say ‘that won’t do you any good- this is gaol not bloody university’. The uni management bit just isn’t accepted, it’s perceived as being divorced from the work here. The reaction is mixed from the exec’s and the junior ranks. I’d say 50 per cent of officers are against it. People in this job who want to can just float. I’d only talk to a select few people about it.*

*Exec’s who aren’t interested in studies are a group that have generally been in the system for years and who don’t see any need for study. They don’t have the skills, the motivation or the desire to do it. They espouse the opinion that senior ranks and executive jobs should go to those officers with on the ground experience, operational experience not tertiary qualifications.*

Officers who attempt tertiary studies suffer a form of prejudice, as the occupation
attempts the transition from one which previously required no formal educational qualifications and did not align such qualifications to promotion or progression. Officers who now occupy management positions throughout the Department identify strongly with the previous era and are threatened by the change to professional education.

The concept of negative workplace reaction towards studies of this kind was strongest for non-commissioned officers whose peers not only expressed their disapproval of the course but often actively campaigned against it:

> Lots of people came to me when they heard that I was studying and said “That’s a waste of time”, they say ‘that will give you nothing and take you nowhere—that’s just for the Department and won’t get you anywhere outside, it’s of no value’. They said if you were promoted because of it you would be appealed against.

> When I went on to the Associate Degree the negative comments got stronger. Seniors (correctional officers) came to me and said ‘isn’t this too hard—what do you think this will do for you? I got sick of this and to get them off my back I made up a story that I was just doing it for a nice tax return, for the books, computer and other things.

The effect of these negative workplace reactions and comments is that officers disguise or withhold the fact that they are studying. This is a stark contrast to other adults who attempt tertiary studies. In some cases prison officers even lie about being enrolled to avoid persecution.

Officers undertaking the Associate Degree are also faced with the pressure of having to provide their completed work for colleagues to plagiarise. Their colleagues expect the ‘team-work’ that is essential for the safety and good order of their work environment to extend to their assignments. However, the officers interviewed expressed the view that this often meant blatant plagiarism:

> When you work with these people every day, it seems natural that you should share your ideas, your work. But they wanted the completed assignments to simply copy. I always said to them that if you can spare just 30 minutes a day you could do this. But mostly, they said they didn’t have time.

> The really bad reactions came from the ones who started the course but didn’t finish. Mostly Senior Prison Officers, about that rank,. They want the Associate Degree for promotion but they don’t want to put in the time and effort to get it.

This undercurrent of negativity is also noted in the studies of Lombardo (1981, 1985) where he describes the inconsistency of the prison as a workplace, which is laden with fear and mental tension. In the only Australian study of this kind Myers (1987) concluded that prison officers exhibited a lack of trust and were suspicious of their colleagues frequently exhibiting what Myers termed ‘back stabbing behaviour’.
The ‘old culture’

Many of the officers who were interviewed made reference to ‘the old culture’ which is acknowledged as the attitude to the job which is possessed by long-serving officers. They expressed the view that whilst the job of correctional officer has undergone enormous changes in the past two decades, some officers have steadfastly resisted this change. The move to professionalise the occupation through education is seen as a threat to the job security of the ‘old culture’:

We are still bound by the old culture. It’s struggling to continue its existence. Younger people are winning positions through personality and work performance. But it’s going to take another era of 10-15 years before there is a real attrition rate of that old culture. Before a business oriented approach happens. The days when someone simply rises through the ranks to Governor are coming to an end.

This highlights the continuing struggle to have the concept of professional education integrated into the career development process and the career structures of the occupation aligned to progress in tertiary studies. According to the CPD-CS database, only one out of every three non-commissioned prison officers engage in the CPD-CS course. Those who do attempt the course are placed under tremendous pressure by their colleagues because they undertake these studies voluntarily and professional education is culturally unacceptable. Those officers who have been in the occupation for many years feel threatened both personally and professionally by what they see as a ‘new breed’ of officer who is willing to engage in further education.

One of the most alarming aspects of the correctional officer culture which was revealed in this study is the lengths it appears that some officers who are opposed to the courses will go to. There were several accounts amongst those interviewed of study guides and course materials being destroyed by colleagues if they were identified in the workplace or sent to an officer at work:

I also noticed that things that were sent to you at the gaol in the mail, if they were marked from the Uni, they might not get to you. I’d ring up and find things had been sent but they’d never get to me. I’ve heard some blokes see the stuff and throw it in the bin.

It didn’t actually happen to me but I’ve also heard stories about study materials and letters from the Academy going missing. Staff would see this stuff and destroy it, throw it in the rubbish out of spite.

It appears that those officers who choose not to engage in the CPD-CS courses want to discourage others and to destroy the credibility of the courses. If this fails they are prepared to actively intervene to stifle the progress of those who are studying. Green and Harrison (1993) refer to the 13 year struggle the NSW Department of Corrective Services had undertaken in an effort to educate and professionalise what they termed the ‘reform resistant culture’. The study of Regoli, Pool and Shrink (1979) cautions that the introduction of a program of tertiary education for prison officers could serve
to divide the workforce and lead to bitterness, as the established officers resent their colleagues’ quest for credentials.

**Peer support**

There was a distinct contrast between the two CPD-CS courses in relation to the notion of support, whether tacit through practical assistance or perceived, through encouragement, praise and the acceptance of the course among their peers. The theme of peer support and encouragement was strong in relation to the commissioned officers. They felt that they needed the camaraderie and network of support to pool ideas, and as a means of boosting morale when enthusiasm waned:

*At the time I started the course a number of others from here were doing it, so the peer support kept me going. I’m not one to really get into study so the others helped.*

*A couple of the others I was doing it with we even formed informal study groups over the phone and helped each other with assignments and information where we could.*

This attitude to study occurs at the commissioned officer rank because these officers are fewer in number and they are required to work as a management team. They must adopt a strong system of peer support to ensure the smooth operation of geographically remote correctional centres.

In some cases there were several officers engaged in the MDP from the one work location (correctional centre), which guaranteed peer support:

*At the time I did this I was working at Broken Hill and all three executives there, the Governor, the Deputy and the Staff Officer, which was me, were doing this course- and all three completed it. We are all career orientated, we supported each other throughout the course and I know that certainly helped me finish it.*

In contrast to the MDP, the officers in the Associate Degree expressed no such feelings of camaraderie and the theme of ‘study in isolation’ was recurring. This could be attributed in part to the reluctance of these officers to admit to colleagues they were studying for fear of being ridiculed or outcast:

*I wouldn’t have got together with other people to do it. For a start I didn’t know who else was doing it, there’s a bit of suspicion about it - so I preferred to just set my own goals.*

*I never really discussed it with anyone, I just did it and didn’t look for help, certainly not from anyone else at work. If people see you doing something, studying or something at work or with a book, that’s when they would say something, they can’t resist saying something, especially if there’s others*
It appears that non-commissioned officers who have been successful in the Associate Degree in Correctional Administration have done so in the face of considerable adversity in the workplace. They have had to adopt an almost dogged determination to succeed, based solely on their personal conviction to complete the course and in spite of the comments and actions of the workplace culture. This has most often meant that the learning process has occurred without any form of support and in complete isolation, even from fellow officers who were enrolled in the courses.

This situation is quite remarkable when one considers that peer support is nominated in the literature as an important component in distance education. Gottschalk (1996) describes the support systems which can be provided by peers as crucial to the success of the distance education student.

**CONTEXTUAL OR INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS WHICH IMPEDE LEARNING**

The final theme which was emerges in this study is the effect of the context of the correctional centre workplace on those engaged in the courses. This includes the recognition from management, support through the provision of study leave and the important link between studies and promotion:

**Recognition from management**

While the Department views professional education as an important corporate priority, this view is not always shared at the grassroots level of management in the various correctional centres:

> A very senior officer in the Department who’s now got a qualification in the other program (Management Development Program) when I’ve approached her for help has been no help at all. She said to me, ‘I did it tough and so should you’.

> Senior people in the Department both custodial and non-custodial weren’t much help either. You have to speak to them to do certain bits of the course and they’d ask what I was doing and when I told them they’d sought of say, ‘oh, that course’ and tell me I was wasting my time.

> There’s absolutely no recognition from management. When I graduated no one from my gaol came to the parade, I got no recognition, no one even said well done, the Governor wouldn’t even know I did it.

These officers highlight the issue of localised support which should be an integral part of this program. It is apparent that in some cases, officers are so embittered by their
experience they feel disinclined to assist others even after they have completed the program. The commitment to professional education has come from the highest levels of the Department. However, it appears that the initiative has been introduced without the support or co-operation of local management. Accordingly, the workplace culture has been able to reject it. It is perceived as a threat to officers who, as individuals, have rejected the notion of further formal education.

An officer who is enrolled in the MDP, very succinctly sums up the additional pressure which officers who gain qualifications are placed under as he perceived they are ridiculed even more harshly if they are seen to be educated:

I’ve had none (recognition) at all. Actually it works against you, you are looked upon as an academic idiot. If you make a mistake, you suffer even more for it, you’re ridiculed because you’re supposed to be an academic and know it all.

As the officers who successfully complete the program are in the minority they will continue to be placed under pressure by their colleagues. Those who have rejected the courses are effectively trying to convince themselves, and others, that the courses have no merit and are of no benefit for the occupation.

One of the key themes in the literature is recognition for study, which is nominated as a key motivating force in an adult’s desire to attempt tertiary studies. It appears that this program is being eroded as those who successfully complete it are not being rewarded with promotional opportunities. Many seem to believe they are not even being officially acknowledged for their achievements, thus adding to their overall discontentment.

**Importance of management supporting the education initiative**

Many of the officers who undertake these courses do so primarily as a means to enhance their career prospects. An estimated $6 million has been spent on this initiative and the Department actively promotes education as the way forward for the occupation. Accordingly, they expect to be recognised by their local management for their efforts. When this recognition is not forthcoming it often causes anxiety about wasted efforts and makes the officers question the value of their achievements:

I was a bit peeved off when I got the Certificate (in Management). It just arrived in the mail. I thought gee I’ve achieved something here, but the Superintendent didn’t even present it to me. You compare this to the dinners and speeches they have at the Academy after bloody in-house courses, like Senior’s (Senior Correctional Officer pre-promotional course) courses where they get something for just turning up. I’d put years into this and got it through the mail- that took the value away from it. The only time I ever had a congratulatory comment was when I told people I had graduated and they said well done. But nothing officially, nothing from the hierarchy. The Superintendent should have presented it at the staff meeting. My 15 year Department service medal was presented to me by the Commissioner- to me personally. If you’ve reached some goal, getting it through the mail takes
away from it.

The lack of both formal and informal recognition by local management for those officers who complete the courses creates the impression that the courses are not significant. Conversely, when an officer feels their efforts have been recognised and that their colleagues acknowledge their achievements, they expressed a strong desire to continue with further studies and feel very positive about the experience:

*I was at Mulawa (a women's prison) when I finished the Certificate and the Advanced Certificate and people saw it in the Bulletin (departmental magazine) after the Graduation ceremonies. A lot of the other officers congratulated me and I felt good about it. But it’s that sort of environment there, it’s a women’s gaol and they like to see women doing well. Gaols like Bathurst and Goulburn make it hard for women to succeed.*

This would have the effect of making the individual identify strongly with what they have achieved and make them inclined to encourage others.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study demonstrates that NSW prison officers in particular, face several unique impediments in attempting professional education as an occupational group. While Treyvaud and Davies (1989) correctly identified several ‘institutional’ difficulties when the program was first established such as geographic isolation; the constraints of overtime and shift work; and a record of poor educational achievement, issues associated with the prison officer culture which were revealed in this study must now be added to that list. These issues would include the fear and reluctance to contact Associate Lecturers and the active resistance to the courses from workmates and local management.

The impediments which confront prison officers who engage in tertiary studies through the CPD-CS which have been identified in this study present a continuing challenge to the professionalisation of the occupation. After nearly a decade, it may be time for the viability of the commitment to this process to be explored in the context of distance education as the mode of delivery, and in the face of the resistant prison officer culture and the academic abilities of those who are attracted to the profession.

The study highlighted numerous differences between the experience of commissioned and non-commissioned officers who undertake post-graduate and undergraduate programs respectively. Commissioned officers are generally more successful and have embraced professional education in far greater numbers than their lower ranking colleagues. One of the major reasons for this success is that they undertake their studies with a strong peer support network. They generally have an office, a computer and a flexible work schedule which permits them to complete some of their studies whilst at work. They have already achieved significant promotional opportunities and the course represents an additional means to advance their career.

The non-commissioned prison officers who were interviewed for this study have been
successful individually but collectively their experience suggests the Associate Degree in Correctional Administration is only achieved against significant odds. The officers interviewed for this study revealed a routine of study in isolation for fear of ridicule and harassment by colleagues. Unlike their commissioned colleagues they were reluctant to seek support from lecturers and expressed the view that prison management opposed the courses in principle. They expressed a strong desire for promotion through education and also saw the course as an opportunity to add some credibility to their profession. However, for many the promotional opportunities had not been forthcoming and they completed the experience harbouring considerable resentment.

The results of this study would indicate that while Government has been willing to provide considerable finance and the infrastructure to professionalise the occupation, these initiatives have been frustrated at the management level in the correctional institutions. The lack of will by local prison management to support those officers who wish to study and the failure to reward studies with promotion and career development loom large as the twin barriers to the success of this initiative. This situation can also be linked to the lack of cohesion and peer support apparent in the undergraduate program, which must be acknowledged as the cornerstone of the educational reform process.

As a consequence of the failure of the courses to be accepted by the prison officer culture, a situation has been allowed to develop where those who successfully complete the courses are marginalised and become cynical and dissatisfied. This inevitably leads them to question the value of their achievements, the relevance of what they have learned and of the education process.
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