

# Transcending prison walls through transformative learning

## THE AUSTRALIAN INSIDE-OUT PRISON EXCHANGE PROGRAM

A university course uniting incarcerated individuals (“inside students”) and university students (“outside students”) to learn together as peers in prison.



### Inside-out development

Inside-Out originated nearly 30 years ago in Pennsylvania, USA. In the mid-1990s, an incarcerated person had an idea to bring together incarcerated people and university students for a semester-long discussion about the real and deep issues surrounding the criminal justice system.

### Research tells us

Adult learning frameworks and processes are referred to as andragogy, and are viewed as a life-long process that is inherently linked to self-concept. It is this element that makes learning “transformative” due to dialogue playing an important role in creating and (re)creating our sense-of-self.

### Past findings

As the student cohorts merged, they developed deeper understandings of how criminal justice processes shaped their experiences, perceptions, and positionality. This transformative learning enabled both groups to “transcend the prison walls” and collaborate in a shared educational space.

## The transformative-dialogic method of Inside-Out

### Traditional Pedagogy

- One-way, didactic
- Teacher-centered
- Passive learners
- Focus on content



### Inside-Out Approach

- Dialogic & participatory
- Facilitator-led
- Active co-learners
- Focus on meaning & experience

*“One group is not ‘teaching’ the other; rather, we are all learning together.”*

## Bringing Inside-Out to Victoria Australia

01

Partnerships are built between Corrections Victoria and RMIT University.

02

Eight year planning process addressing risk and duty-of-care to all involved.

03

Organisations agree on risk assessments, enrolment procedures and graduation ceremony.

04

Inside-Out curriculum amended to meet Australian needs.

05

Mixed-method evaluation conducted.



### Selection process

Outside student selection commenced with information sessions at RMIT University. Inside student selection tool was developed with Corrections Victoria. Two-pronged selection process resulted in an inaugural class list of 15 “outside” students and 15 “inside” students at each site.

### Program commencement

Final program approval was granted in 2014, with the first class running in 2015. Inside-Out facilitators held regular information sessions at participating prisons. Stakeholders are kept informed via several channels of communication.

## Findings from Victorian Inside-Out Program

### Participants

A total of 25 students volunteered to participate in the focus groups. Twelve “inside” students (7 from DPFC, 5 from MCC) and 13 “outside” students. “Inside” students had histories of disadvantage in terms of poverty, abuse and marginalisation. All “outside” students reported to have come from privileged backgrounds, worked part-time while studying and had never been incarcerated.



### Results

The program broke down stereotypes and fostered equality. Inside students shed the “prisoner” label; outside students gained empathy and saw peers as complex individuals.

Academic & Personal Growth: Outside students gained real-world insight and career readiness. Inside students felt empowered and more confident. Learning was deeper than in traditional lectures.

### Inside Student Experiences

“The initial sense of ‘otherness’ that we as prisoners always feel quickly disappeared, and by the end of our second class it no longer mattered who was in green [prison uniform] and who was not” (Inside student, MCC).

“We were all equals. We were graded equally, we were treated equally” (Inside student, MCC).

“After having forgotten what it feels like, I now have self-worth and have been empowered, and I imagine a better future for myself” (Inside student, DPFC).



### Outside Student Experiences

“You have all these biases without even really thinking about it [...] you know that there’s not that ‘typical’ offender, but until you go and see it for yourself, that’s when it all sets in and you really grasp it” (Outside student, DPFC).

“We were put into a situation where we were all equal. We were all students” (Outside student, MCC).

“You’re not really going to get far if you can feel the barrier between you and [the person] who you’re trying to help get through the [corrections] order” (Outside student, MCC).

**THE EQUITABLE SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE ALLOWED INSIDE STUDENTS TO BE SOMEONE OTHER THAN A LABEL, AND FACILITATED THE OUTSIDE STUDENTS’ GROWTH AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIAL CONTRIBUTORS TO THE CRIME RATE AND THE FAR-REACHING IMPACT OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS.**