

Access to Education Claimed as a Right
But Treated as a Privilege:
Experiences of Learners who are
Incarcerated with Accessing Educational
Opportunities and Pathways in Ontario,
Canada

Summary of the Findings

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Project partners include Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, Humber College and Amadeusz. The Principal Researchers for this study is Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad and Tina-Nadia Gopal Chambers. This report was written by Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad and Tina-Nadia Gopal Chambers. Research assistance was provided by Megan MacDonald.

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"Jail in my opinion does not reform people unless they're given the right tools inside. Jail only makes criminals worse criminals when you restrict them access to good things such as education."

Student Who Is Incarcerated

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Access to education is a human right that should be upheld for everyone including individuals who are incarcerated as outlined in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2022).

In phase 1 of this research project, a literature review was conducted to examine what educational opportunities are available to individuals incarcerated in Ontario, Canada with a focus on availability and accessibility to opportunities and pathways. The findings and recommendations were published in a report in February 2021 titled Access to Post-Secondary Schooling and The Credit Transfer Experience of the Remand Population in Ontario (Eizadirad, 2021).

In phase 2 of this research project, a series of interviews were conducted with various key stakeholders to further explore and expand on the themes and findings from the literature review. 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. Key guiding questions for the project were:

- What are the experiences of individuals who receive educational opportunities while incarcerated?
- What are the experiences of individuals incarcerated as they pursue post-secondary education while incarcerated or after being released from jail?
- Is learning, courses, or training provided while incarcerated, specifically credits earned, formally recognized by colleges or universities they enter? What challenges and barriers are experienced as part of transferring between post-secondary institutions?
- What could be enacted and implemented to create greater accessibility to educational opportunities to streamline the transition between post-secondary institutions for learners who are or formerly incarcerated?

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

WHO DID THE RESEARCH?

The research was funded by Ontario Centre for Articulation and Transfer and K2 & Associates. Faculty from Humber College and Education Consulting led the design of the research project and conducted the research. Ethics approval was provided by Humber College Research Ethics Board #RP-0209. Amadeusz contributed outreach, coordination, in-kind resources and support. Amadeusz is an Ontario charity that supports young people who are incarcerated to create positive change in their lives through access to education, community supports, mentorship and exceptional care. The research team worked in partnership with Amadeusz to identify participants to be interviewed. Overall, the findings and insights shared throughout this report are based on lived experiences of learners who are or formerly incarcerated as well as others involved with delivery of educational programs within incarceration facilities such as Amadeusz staff and representatives from jails or post-secondary institutions.

"Post-secondary programs and course options are limited. Sometimes people are forced to do a program or course they are not passionate about because of the limited options. When this happens and they are released it is like starting from scratch because they now can pursue what they want. This is a missed opportunity when we cannot start a post-secondary plan before release"

Program Participant

HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

25 key informants were recruited and interviewed via purposeful sampling through Amadeusz's contacts and networks. 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 60 to 90 minutes.

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.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

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 below:**
 - a. Completed high school with Amadeusz while incarcerated, started post-secondary courses while incarcerated, and continued their post-secondary studies after being released.
 - b. Completed high school with Amadeusz while incarcerated, got released, and then started post-secondary studies.
 - c. Already had their high school diploma upon incarceration. Began post-secondary courses with Amadeusz while incarcerated and continued their post-secondary studies after being released.
 - d. Already had their high school diploma and enrolled in a post-secondary program before incarceration. Continued their post-secondary studies with Amadeusz while incarcerated.
- 3) Representatives from post-secondary institutions (n=8) and jails (n=2) interested or involved in delivery of educational programs in incarceration facilities.**

The table shows the age, gender, and ethnicity of Amadeusz program participants interviewed:

Participant	Age	Gender (self-identified)	Ethnicity (self-identified)
1	31	Trans Female	Mixed Identity
2	34	Male	Black and African
3	34	Male	Chinese
4	28	Male	Latino and Hispanic
5	29	Male	Jamaican
6	28	Male	White
7	32	Male	Mixed Identity: Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Dutch, Spanish, and Filipino
8	28	Male	Jamaican and Canadian
9	41	Male	Japanese
10	26	Male	White

REPORT 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the following recommendations are made:

#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. This will contribute to disrupting deficit thinking about individuals incarcerated and their competencies and further create awareness about education as a human right, even for individuals incarcerated, as outlined in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

#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.

LEARNINGS

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.

Overall, the 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.

The full report will be available for download on the Amadeusz website at www.amadeusz.ca

PARTICIPANT VOICES ”

"Post-secondary is expensive! It's expensive, and so the way to increase reliability and access to, to post-secondary is to have a funding stream that is a core funding stream that can provide a longitudinal support for folks to actually take these courses. People unfortunately don't see, as you and I both know, people don't recognize and see folks who are inside as viable recipients for education."

"For the most part, inmates can only do one course per year because of the fact that there's limited funding. Others just are unable to take courses because they have no means to pay for them and the government doesn't support them."

"Most people here don't have the money to purchase a course. They might not have the money, but there's a lot of people that have the desire and the ability to do these courses."

THANK YOU

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