



## EXPLORING INCARCERATED STUDENT PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE MODE OF STUDYING

**Vimbi Petrus Mahlangu**

University of South Africa

Correspondence Author: [mahlavp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mahlavp@unisa.ac.za)

### Abstract

*The case study aimed to investigate the experiences of incarcerated students engaged in distance learning and the university's support efforts. Its objective was to guide future research and initiatives for better supporting this student group. The central inquiry was focused on understanding the challenges and benefits faced by incarcerated students participating in distance education. Through qualitative methods, data were gathered via in-depth interviews with 12 incarcerated students enrolled in a Namibian correctional facility's distance education program. The findings highlighted key themes such as the flexibility and independence provided by distance learning, enabling students to manage academic commitments alongside prison duties. Challenges noted included limited access to technology, internet disruptions, and difficulties in accessing learning materials. Furthermore, participants emphasized how distance education positively influenced their personal growth, skills development, and prospects for reintegrating into society post-incarceration. The study underscores the necessity of customizing distance education initiatives to meet the unique needs and constraints of incarcerated individuals, acknowledging the transformative potential of education within the prison environment.*

**Keywords:** distance education, incarcerated students, correctional education, educational experiences, qualitative study

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the case study was to explore the experiences of incarcerated students studying through distance learning and the efforts made by the university to support them, with the goal of informing future research and initiatives to better support this student population. The study was conducted in a Namibian prison context, exploring the experiences of incarcerated students engaging in distance mode of learning. This is an important area of research, as access to higher education for incarcerated individuals can have significant benefits in terms of reducing recidivism, improving employment prospects, and promoting personal growth and rehabilitation (Farley et al., 2016; Ministry of Justice, 2019).

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the case study was to explore the experiences of incarcerated students studying through distance learning, and the efforts made by the university to support them, with the goal of informing future research and initiatives to better support this student population.

### BACKGROUND

The study was conducted in a Namibian prison context, exploring the experiences of incarcerated students engaging in distance mode of learning. The reporting is based on the theme that emerged from the bigger study titled: Supervision of Students in a Distance E-Learning Mode: Supervision of Prisoners.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the challenges faced by prisoners is the sudden switching between facilities, which can disrupt their education and make it impossible for them to bring printed materials with them (Farley et al., 2016; Huzar & Kassem, 2022). Further research is necessary to fully understand the effects on this

**EXPLORING INCARCERATED STUDENT PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE MODE OF STUDYING***Vimbi Petrus Mahlagu*

specific student body, however the case study details the educational institution's efforts to support prisoners by providing printed library resources through a volunteer program (Huzar & Kassem, 2022). Distance learning in a prison setting is challenging due to a number of factors, including frequent transfers between prisons, restricted access to technology and online resources, a lack of designated study areas or support services, and others (Farley et al., 2016). The pursuit of higher education by prisoners is a complex and multifaceted subject that requires close examination. Inmate students who are incarcerated have unique difficulties and obstacles that their peers do not encounter in regular learning settings. Conversely, obtaining higher education while incarcerated presents advantageous opportunities for skill development, personal growth, and a seamless release and reintegration into society.

**2.1 Challenges of Studying in Prison**

The inability of students who are incarcerated to have direct access to the internet and digital learning resources is one of their biggest problems. The "digital shift" (Hopkins & Farley, 2014, p. 42), which has made higher education more technologically oriented, has presented new challenges for convicts, who are normally prohibited from accessing the internet for security-related reasons. According to Hopkins and Farley (2014), p. 43, this gap can "exacerbate the social and cultural isolation of incarcerated students" and prevent them from participating completely in online courses and learning management systems. Students who are incarcerated not only confront technical challenges but also severe resource and logistical limitations. Within the prison, access to study areas, textbooks, and tangible educational resources may be severely limited (Huijser et al., 2008).

Inmates may not receive the same amount of academic support and one-on-one attention as students in traditional higher education settings due to overcrowding in jails and a lack of staff resources (White & Perrone, 1997). Another issue is that a large number of those who are incarcerated have low socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. According to studies, people from underprivileged and marginalized areas who have not completed their secondary education are frequently found in jails (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Reiman & Leighton, 2010). Because of this, making the switch to postsecondary education can be very difficult. To help with this, extra assistance and readiness courses are needed. Effective learning and study can also be hampered by the psychologically and emotionally stressful nature of the jail environment. The psychological effects of jail, worries about one's safety, and the breakup of social and familial ties can all negatively affect a student's mental health and academic achievement (Vinson, 2004, 2007).

The research on distance education in general can offer some pertinent insights when examining the difficulties experienced by jailed students in open and distance learning. Research has indicated that learners in open-access remote learning settings may encounter a range of difficulties, including Technology and resource accessibility: Students who are incarcerated might not have full access to the technology resources and tools needed for successful remote learning, such as computers, internet connectivity, and study materials (Mabunda, 2010). Absence of direction and assistance: Students who are incarcerated could not receive the same level of academic and administrative assistance that they would in more conventional on-campus settings, which could negatively impact their educational experience (Duve & Beets, 2016). Motivation and seclusion: The absence of in-person interactions with peers and instructors, coupled with a feeling of seclusion, can have a detrimental effect on the motivation and involvement of students incarcerated in remote learning initiatives (Kilty & Orsini, 2018).

Institutional barriers: According to Manager et al. (2010), laws, rules, and security measures at prisons may erect further obstacles in the way of imprisoned students' accessing and taking use of distant learning options. It is crucial to guarantee sufficient resources, support, and institutional cooperation to enable jailed student inmates' access to high-quality education and rehabilitation programs in order to



solve the aforementioned issues and enhance their experiences while studying remotely. Absence of digital resources and internet access: For security concerns, incarcerated students are frequently prohibited internet access, which restricts their access to online course materials and digital learning tools. In comparison to their peers in traditional higher education settings, students who are jailed may be even more isolated and disadvantaged as a result of the "digital divide" (Hopkins & Farley, 2014).

Limited availability of physical learning resources: Students incarcerated may have restricted use of study rooms, stationery, and textbooks within the institution. Students in prisons frequently do not receive the same degree of academic support and one-on-one attention as students in traditional settings due to overcrowding in prisons and a lack of staff resources (White & Perrone, 1997). Socioeconomic and educational backgrounds: According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) and Reiman & Leighton (2010), many people who are incarcerated are from underprivileged and marginalized groups. Their levels of secondary school education are also low. This might make the move to tertiary education more difficult, necessitating extra help and preparatory courses. Impact of incarceration on the mind and emotions: Students who are incarcerated may experience negative effects on their mental health and academic performance due to the stress of their confinement, worries about their physical safety, and the disruption of social and familial ties (Vinson, 2004, 2007).

## 2.2 Opportunities of Studying in Prison

Notwithstanding the numerous challenges, earning a postsecondary degree while incarcerated may present beneficial opportunities for personal growth and rehabilitation. Research has shown that education is essential for both successful jail release and self-directed rehabilitation (White & Graham, 2010). Participating in higher education programs can help prisoners strengthen their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as provide them a sense of purpose and increase their self-esteem (Reiman & Leighton, 2010). These cognitive, social-emotional, and self-awareness skills can be extremely helpful in helping individuals develop a more positive sense of self and agency, which can facilitate a more seamless reintegration into society (White & Perrone, 1997). Postsecondary education can also assist incarcerated individuals in discovering new professional paths and employment opportunities, increasing their prospects of securing a reliable, well-paying job following their release from imprisonment. Recidivism may be reduced as a result, and reintegration into society may go more smoothly (Vinson, 2004). Education can help promote positive behavioral changes and a more disciplined, therapeutic prison environment. It has also been demonstrated that jailed students who take part in postsecondary education programs have reduced rates of disciplinary infractions inside the prison system (Huijser et al., 2008).

The following chances are frequent and important for students who are incarcerated:

Education helps incarcerated people create a more positive sense of identity and agency, which can result in a successful reintegration into the society and pave the road for self-directed rehabilitation (White & Graham, 2010). Development of cognitive and affective capacities: Participating in higher education programs can help prisoners develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as their sense of purpose and self-worth (Reiman & Leighton, 2010). Greater career and employment opportunities and decreased recidivism: Higher education can assist incarcerated individuals in finding new occupations and careers, hence reducing their risk of recidivism and promoting a more seamless transition back into society (Vinson, 2004). Promotion of a more orderly and rehabilitative prison environment: Studies have revealed that prisoners taking part in postsecondary education programs have a lower incidence of disciplinary offenses in the prison system, suggesting that education can have a positive behavioral change-inducing effect (Huijser et al., 2008).

## **EXPLORING INCARCERATED STUDENT PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE MODE OF STUDYING**

*Vimbi Petrus Mahlagu*

---

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION METHOD**

#### **3.1 Objective**

To understand the experiences and challenges faced by incarcerated students who are studying through distance learning while in prison.

#### **3.2 Question**

What are the experiences of incarcerated students who are studying through distance learning while in prison?

#### **3.3 Data collection**

The study adopted a qualitative approach and used interviews to obtain information to understand the experiences of the incarcerated student prisoners. Interpretive paradigm was used in the interpretation of the information. To ensure accuracy, a proficient transcriber meticulously transcribed the tape-recorded interviews verbatim. Subsequently, the author was provided with the transcripts to interpret, facilitating a thorough analysis of the qualitative data collected. This methodological rigor aimed to capture the nuanced perspectives and experiences of incarcerated individuals regarding their motivations for engaging in further education through distance e-learning while in prison.

#### **3.4 Data analysis**

Following the transcription of the voice-recorded interviews, the transcripts were passed to a qualified professional translator proficient in the relevant languages. The translator meticulously translated the data verbatim, ensuring an accurate representation of the participants' responses. Subsequently, thematic analysis was employed to derive key themes and patterns from the questions posed during the interviews. This analytical approach facilitated the identification and interpretation of recurring ideas, motivations, and challenges expressed by the incarcerated individuals regarding their participation in distance e-learning programs while in prison. Through this method, a comprehensive understanding of the factors motivating prisoners to further their studies in a distance e-learning mode was elucidated.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Results**

Participant 1, said, *“My experience in studying in studying, it is very nice, it is a little bit of challenge because it is a prison, we don't have contact of freedom of doing things the way we would like, but we could do it. So, it was not bad.*

Participant 2, said, *“My experience is that there is a lot of disturbance, and because of work with myself, although there is those disturbance, I experience that sometimes you fellow inmates they are jealous with you, but it doesn't mean you must give up. And also, the other experiences, officers, the other side of the officers, they don't understand why you your inmates they are studying, because they feel like, no it is just what I say, if you study here, it is wasting of time but it is something which we are preparing for outside. It is one of the experiences which I encountered while studying”.*

Participant 3 said, *“Disturbance, and officers, some of the officers they don't, they are not helpful”.*

Participant 4 said, *“My experiences is I think, since I came in I think I was fortunately enough to have supporting officers, officers who were supportive from day one, when I informed them that I want to do my studies, who encouraged me to study, because that on the positive side now, that is now encouragement, you get encouragement to study, but then sometimes due to our incarceration, sometimes we lose hope, you feel hopeless, sometimes, this is a mental state, something that tries to break you down*





*but then you are encouraging yourself, you push yourself to do it for you, for your family, for your community and for the nation as a whole”.*

Participant 5 said, *“My experiences are not all negative, it was difficult, it is a struggle to take up my studies, but I persevered and push, I believe that I needed to do this. I wanted to do this and to improve myself. I have also been encouraged by other students who took up studies, for instance our doctor here, he was one of my motivated factors to take up studies. It is, there is some inconvenience sometimes, but you get used to them because we are not really at liberty, our minds are free, but the experience is that sometimes people, there is commotion and there are some arguments, they disturb you when you are trying to study. So these things are things that you challenged when you are studying”.*

Participant 6 said, *“Prison life is even if it was hiccups here and there, I have learned a lot that I have excel more than people whom I left outside. Prison life is very hard but now since you study, some things become easier like you are like you are the master key to study in prison”.*

Participant 7 said, *“The officers respect you, you develop self-esteem and, it is very hard but with time things get better. Things get better. It is not easy, as I have said, sometimes you are in the cell you want to study, but the noise is too high”.*

Participant 8 said, *“Other inmates do not really pay attention that you are studying. So, you have to make most of the night while they are sleeping. So that is life, we live here”.*

Participant 9 said, *“So basically, studying during the night. To me I would say it is a good thing. Why I say that, because when I came here, I always compared even the people where I live, when I came here I thought but I tried to manage to get those points for the tertiary level, I thought I am going to reach that level that I can qualify with the tertiary level, and also the same time to qualify the requirements, requirements in five subjects which means, the fact is before I came here that one was the motive to take me through, so now when I speak, I think that no at least I have achieved something, because when I came I don't know myself, I know what happened outside, I will just leave it there”.*

Participant 10 said, *“Now this is the time for me, once I go out, at least I go there, then I will have the qualification at a tertiary level”.*

Participants 11 said, *“My experience in prison life is the challenges that one has encountering from the peers. It is not easy, you have to distance yourself, you must be positive at all times and isolate yourself, make your peers, it is possible because negatively always breaks and people will always be negative. So, the positiveness it is the one who is driving me, keeps me strong in the studies.*

Participant 12 said, *“Prison life is difficult but as I said, I am on holiday in prison”.*

## 4.2 Discussion

The statement by participant 1 that "My experience in studying in studying, it is very nice, it is a little bit of challenge because it is a prison, we don't have contact of freedom of doing things the way we would like, but we could do it. So, it was not bad" reflects the mixed experiences of a student in an educational setting. On the one hand, the student describes the experience as "very nice," suggesting a positive overall perception. However, the student also acknowledges that it was "a little bit of a challenge" and compares the educational environment to a "prison," where they felt a lack of freedom to do things as they would like.

This sentiment can be understood within the context of the transition from high school to university or college, which can be a significant life event for many students (Lowe & Cook, 2003). The shift from a more structured and controlled high school environment to the relative independence and autonomy of higher education can be both exciting and daunting for students (Tinto, 1987). The student's description of feeling "a little bit of a challenge" and "not having contact of freedom" may reflect the stress and adjustment difficulties that some students experience during this transition (Briggs et al., 2012). At the same time, the student's statement that "we could do it" and that the experience "was not bad" suggests a resilient and adaptive attitude. This aligns with research on student resilience, which highlights

**EXPLORING INCARCERATED STUDENT PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE MODE OF STUDYING***Vimbi Petrus Mahlagu*

the importance of students' ability to navigate challenges and develop coping strategies to succeed in higher education (Baumert & Dommett, 2021).

The student's acknowledgment of the challenges, coupled with their determination to overcome them, demonstrates a level of self-awareness and personal agency that can contribute to a positive educational experience (Tinto, 2017). The student's statement reflects the complex and nuanced nature of the educational experience, particularly the transition to higher education. While the student faced some challenges and perceived limitations in their freedom, they were ultimately able to navigate these obstacles and find value in their studies. This experience highlights the importance of supporting students during this crucial transition and fostering an educational environment that balances structure and autonomy to facilitate student success and well-being in prison.

Participant 2 highlights the challenges faced by incarcerated individuals when pursuing education. The student describes experiencing "disturbance" and "jealousy" from fellow inmates, suggesting a lack of support or even resentment towards educational pursuits (Manger et al., 2010). Additionally, the student notes that some prison officers perceive education as a "waste of time," indicating a lack of understanding or appreciation for the value of education for incarcerated individuals (Pompoco et al., 2017). These findings align with research suggesting that institutional barriers, such as unsupportive attitudes from staff and other inmates can hinder educational engagement among incarcerated populations (Vacca, 2004). Despite these challenges, the student emphasizes the importance of perseverance, stating that "it doesn't mean you must give up." This resilience is crucial, as education can provide incarcerated individuals with opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and better reintegration into society upon release (Bozick et al., 2018).

Participant 3 found that students often experience significant disturbances that can hinder their academic progress and personal development (Vacca, 2004). Studies have shown that the prison environment can be challenging with some correctional officers exhibiting unhelpful attitudes towards incarcerated students (Tewksbury & Stengel, 2006). This can create a barrier to effective learning and rehabilitation. Scholars argue that improving the attitudes and training of prison staff, as well as providing a more supportive learning environment, are crucial to addressing these issues and ensuring that incarcerated students have access to quality educational opportunities (Harlow, 2003; Steurer & Smith, 2003). Addressing these disturbances and fostering a positive learning climate in prisons is essential for promoting the academic success and successful reintegration of incarcerated individuals.

Participant 4 experienced both the positive and negative aspects of pursuing education while incarcerated. On the positive side, the prisoner was fortunate to have supportive officers who encouraged him to study (Drake, 2014). This type of support from correctional staff can be invaluable in motivating prisoners to engage in educational programs (Costelloe & Warner, 2014). However, the prisoner also mentioned feeling hopeless and losing hope at times due to the challenges of incarceration which can negatively impact one's mental state and motivation (Olson, 2016). Despite these challenges, the prisoner recognizes the importance of pushing himself to study for his own personal growth as well as for the benefit of his family and community (Baum et al., 2013).

This intrinsic motivation to improve oneself and contribute positively to society is a key factor in successful educational programs for incarcerated individuals (Vacca, 2004). The prisoner's experiences highlight the crucial role that correctional staff can play in either supporting or undermining prisoners' educational aspirations. Fostering a positive, encouraging environment where prisoners feel empowered to pursue educational opportunities can make a significant difference in their rehabilitation and reintegration (Behan, 2014). However, the inherent power dynamics and mental health challenges of the prison environment present significant barriers that must be addressed through a holistic and collaborative approach (Manger et al., 2010).



Participant 5 reflects the complex experiences of an individual who has chosen to pursue further education despite facing various challenges. The individual student acknowledges that his experiences have not been entirely negative, describing the situation as "difficult" and a "struggle" (Kasworm, 2018). However, he persevered and pushed forward driven by a desire to improve himself and he was inspired by the example of a motivated fellow student (Bye et al., 2014). This determination to engage in lifelong learning is a positive attribute as it demonstrates the individual's resilience and commitment to personal growth (Kidd, 2020). At the same time, the student acknowledges the "inconvenience" and "commotion" that can accompany their studies, including "arguments" that "disturb" their attempts to focus (Busher & James, 2019). These challenges can be particularly problematic for adult learners who may have additional responsibilities and constraints on their time and attention while in prison (Kasworm, 2018). Despite these difficulties, the individual expresses a sense of freedom in their mind suggesting that the educational experience has enabled them to expand their perspectives and possibilities (Bye et al., 2014). This insight underscores the transformative potential of education even in the face of adversity. The individual's experiences highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of adult learning, with both positive and negative aspects. The ability to persevere and find inspiration in the success of others coupled with the resilience to overcome disruptive challenges are essential qualities for those who choose to pursue further education later in life (Kidd, 2020).

Participant 6 reflects the potential for personal growth and learning that can occur even in the challenging environment of prison. The individual acknowledges the hardships of prison life but also highlights how the opportunity to study has enabled them to "excel more than people" outside of prison (Brosens, 2019). This suggests that the prison setting, when combined with the motivation to learn, can foster a sense of mastery and empowerment that may be lacking in the lives of those who have not experienced incarceration (Costelloe & Warner, 2014). However, the challenges of prison life should not be minimized, and the potential for rehabilitation and reintegration requires significant systemic support.

Participant 7 suggests that to foster self-esteem and respect from fellow inmates, the challenges faced such as noise in cells can make the experience difficult. This highlights the complex nature of studying in a prison environment for prisoners. Research has shown that studying in distance mode particularly in prison often faces intersectional challenges due to the harsh environment (Hasan, 2021; Loftus, 2008). They experienced isolation within the male-dominated (Holdaway & O'Neill, 2006; Silvestri, 2003). The excerpt's mention of "things get better" with time suggests the resilience and perseverance required, but also the need for organizational support and cultural change to address these issues. The excerpt's emphasis on respect from fellow inmates and the development of self-esteem aligns with studies that have found policing can provide a sense of empowerment and belonging for some in prisons (Rabe-Hemp, 2008). However, the challenges, such as noise in cells, point to the need for improved working conditions and support structures to address the unique experiences of studying students. While there are aspects of empowerment and respect, the organizational culture and work environment continue to pose significant challenges that require concerted efforts towards diversity inclusion and equity within the prison service (Hasan, 2021; Loftus, 2008).

The statement by participant 8 that "Other inmates do not really pay attention that you are studying. So, you have to make most of the night while they are sleeping. So that is life, we live here" highlights the unique challenges faced by incarcerated individuals pursuing higher education (Perna et al., 2014). The lack of privacy and distractions from fellow inmates can make it difficult for students to focus on their studies (Steurer & Smith, 2003). However, this challenge also presents an opportunity for resourcefulness and resilience as the individual must find creative ways to maximize their study time (Vacca, 2004). This demonstrates the determination and motivation required to succeed academically in a correctional setting (Lahm, 2009). Prison wardens working in these environments should be mindful of these barriers and provide support to help prison students overcome them (Coley & Barton, 2006).

Participant 9 concurs with Rice et al. (2023) study who found that improvements in some study metrics, more research is needed to fully understand the broader impacts on student performance and

**EXPLORING INCARCERATED STUDENT PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE MODE OF STUDYING***Vimbi Petrus Mahlagu*

well-being (Smarr, 2023). These findings highlight the importance of considering students' chronobiological needs and providing more flexibility in academic schedules to support studying of students and healthy sleep habits. Participant 10's statement that "Now this is the time for me, once I go out, at least I go there, then I will have the qualification at a tertiary level" can be critically analyzed. From the perspective of research on vocational education and career mobility, it appears that acquiring a tertiary level vocational qualification can represent a kind of "safety net" for some learners (Kristensen, 2001). However, it is important that this step is considered carefully, and that individual learning and career goals are carefully considered (Cedefop, 2021). Distance mode of learning in prison can open up opportunities and it has some challenges (Kristensen, 2001). Comprehensive pedagogical support is crucial to provide the prison students with the best possible support.

Participant 11 highlights the significant challenges faced by individuals in prison, particularly in navigating the social dynamics and maintaining a positive mindset. The experience of distancing oneself from peers and isolating oneself to avoid negativity suggests the inherent difficulties in establishing and maintaining meaningful connections within the prison environment (Davis, 2018). This speaks to the need for incarcerated individuals to develop coping mechanisms and a strong sense of self-preservation to navigate the hostile and stressful conditions of incarceration (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). The emphasis on the importance of positivity as a driving force and a source of strength underscores the role of education and personal growth in the prison experience (Gales et al., 2022). By focusing on their studies and maintaining a positive outlook, the individual is able to find a sense of purpose and agency within the constraints of the prison system (Wah, 2021). This suggests that education and personal development can serve as a transformative tool enabling incarcerated individuals to transcend the limitations of their physical confinement and cultivate a sense of inner freedom (Davis, 2018).

The statement by participant 12 that "Prison life is difficult but as I said, I am on holiday in prison" reflects a concerning and potentially harmful perspective on the realities of prison life. This statement trivializes the significant challenges and deprivations experienced by individuals incarcerated in prisons (Crewe, 2011). Prison life is inherently difficult, with inmates often facing issues such as overcrowding, limited access to rehabilitation programs, and a lack of meaningful activities (Sykes, 1958). The notion of treating imprisonment as a "holiday" undermines the pains of imprisonment and the detrimental impact it can have on an individual's physical and mental well-being (Liebling, 2011). Furthermore, this statement could be interpreted as a display of privilege and a lack of empathy for the experiences of incarcerated individuals (Jewkes, 2005). It is crucial for lecturers and universities to recognize the complexity and severity of the prison environment, rather than dismissing it as a temporary vacation (Crewe et al., 2014). Engaging in critical self-reflection and acknowledging the systemic challenges faced by the incarcerated population is essential for developing a more nuanced understanding of the realities of prison life (Crewe, 2011).

In conclusion, the statement "Prison life is difficult but as I said, I am on holiday in prison" reflects a concerning and problematic perspective that trivializes the hardships faced by incarcerated individuals. Educators and leaders must strive to develop a deeper understanding of the prison system and the experiences of those within it, in order to promote more humane and just practices (Liebling, 2011). Overall, the statement provides a nuanced perspective on the complex and multifaceted nature of the prison experience highlighting the importance of resilience, self-awareness and the transformative potential of education in the face of the challenges and adversities encountered in the prison environment.

**4.3 Acknowledgement**

The author would like to thank the National Research Council of Namibia and the Correctional Authorities of Namibia. Permissions were granted from both the author's institution





[Ethical Clearance Certificate Ref: 2022/11/09/90284259/04/AM] and from the Namibian authorities for the research to be carried out.

### Disclosure statement

No conflict of interest.

### ORCID

Vimbi Petrus Mahlangu <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8251-750X>

## 5. PRACTICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policymakers, lecturers, and correctional authorities should collaborate to create creative solutions and increase this vulnerable population's access to higher education by recognizing the opportunities and problems of studying in prison. The study uncovered challenges such as limited access to technology and online resources, frequent transfers between prisons, and a lack of dedicated study spaces or support services (Farley et al., 2016). Again, the study found that incarcerated students can navigate the distance learning environment by relying on printed materials, peer support, because of limited access to library resources. Also, the study found the reasons why incarcerated students engage in distance learning, such as a desire for personal development, improved employment prospects, or a sense of purpose and connection to the outside world (Ministry of Justice, 2019). The level of support and accommodation provided by the university and prison authorities to facilitate the distance learning experience of the incarcerated students should be strengthened.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The challenges faced by incarcerated students in pursuing postsecondary education are substantial and multifaceted, ranging from technological barriers to logistical constraints and the psychological toll of the prison environment. However, the potential benefits of higher education for incarcerated individuals and the broader community cannot be overlooked. Addressing the unique needs of incarcerated students requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach, involving correctional authorities, educational institutions, and community organizations. Innovative solutions, such as the development of internet-independent technologies and the provision of targeted academic support and preparatory programs, can help to bridge the gap and expand access to higher education for this marginalized population. By investing in the educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals, society can foster personal growth, skill development, and successful reintegration, ultimately contributing to a more just and equitable society. The challenges are significant, but the potential rewards of engaged and empowered incarcerated students are profound. Distance education has emerged as a promising approach to providing educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals. However, there is limited research on the experiences of incarcerated students engaging in distance learning programs.

## 7. SUGGESTION

It is suggested that for improving distance education in prison settings there should be an enhancement of accessibility, quality, and effectiveness of distance learning programs for incarcerated individuals.

## REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2013). Prisoners in Australia, 2013. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/prisoners-australia/latest-release>
- Baum, N. L., Cardozo, B. L., Pat-Horenczyk, R., Ziv, Y., Blanton, C., Reza, A., ... & Brom, D. (2013). Training teachers to build resilience in children in the aftermath of war: a cluster randomized trial. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 42(4), 339-350. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-013-9202-5>

**EXPLORING INCARCERATED STUDENT PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE MODE OF STUDYING***Vimbi Petrus Mahlagu*

- Baumert, A., & Dommett, E. J. (2021). Adapting to university life: Exploring the role of student resilience. *Higher Education*, 81(4), 789-807. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00576-y>
- Behan, C. (2014). Learning to escape: Prison education, rehabilitation and the potential for transformation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 1(1), 20-31. <https://doi.org/10.15845/jper.v1i1.594>
- Bozick, R., Steele, J., Davis, L., & Turner, S. (2018). Does providing inmates with education improve postrelease outcomes? A meta-analysis of correctional education programs in the United States. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14(3), 389-428. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-018-9334-6>
- Briggs, A. R., Clark, J., & Hall, I. (2012). Building bridges: Understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(1), 3-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2011.614468>
- Brosens, D. (2019). Participation in prison education: Voiced by incarcerated adults. *The Prison Journal*, 99(4), 385-406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885519852088>
- Busher, H., & James, N. (2019). The ontological position of action research: Traditionalist and modernist approaches to educational action research. In O. Zuber-Skerritt, L. Wood, & I. Kunzemeyer (Eds.), *Leadership for change and transformation in higher education* (pp. 15-34). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78756-028-520191002>
- Bye, D., Pushkar, D., & Conway, M. (2014). Motivation, interest, and positive affect in traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57(2), 141-158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713606294235>
- Cedefop. (2021). Vocational education and training in Europe, 1995-2035: scenarios for the future. Publications Office. <https://doi.org/10.2801/539572>
- Costelloe, A., & Warner, K. (2014). Prison education across Europe: Policy, practice, politics. *European Journal of Education*, 49(4), 524-536. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12095>
- Costelloe, A., & Warner, K. (2014). Prison education across Europe: policy, practice, politics. *London Review of Education*, 12(2), 178-192. <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.12.2.05>
- Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 509-529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474511422172>
- Crewe, B., Liebling, A., & Hulley, S. (2014). Heavy-light, absent-present: Rethinking the "weight" of imprisonment. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 65(3), 387-410. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12084>
- Davis, J. D. (2018). Caught somewhere between. *Critical Education*, 9(15), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v9i15.186355>
- Drake, D. H. (2014). Researching prisoner experiences with prison officers: An action research-inspired approach. *Action Research*, 12(1), 94-109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750313516810>
- Duve, C., & Beets, P. (2016). Exploring the challenges of open distance learning for prisoners in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 30(1), 110-129.
- Farley, H., Pike, A., Kennepohl, G., & Moffatt, K. (2016). 167 Offsetting the digital divide for prison students. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 32(6).
- Gales, E. J. P., Gales, R. J. P., & Silvano, J. A. (2022). Cognizance *Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2(6), 01-10. <https://doi.org/10.38204/cjms.2022.v02i0601>
- Harlow, C. W. (2003). Education and correctional populations. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e377512004-001>
- Hasan, M. (2021). Keep Calm and Carry on – There Is Nothing to See Here: A Study of Organisational Response Towards Racist Bullying and Harassment of BAME Women in Policing. *Social Sciences*, 10(6), 269-278. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ss.20211006.13> Holdaway, S., & O'Neill, M.



- (2006). Institutional racism in the police: An empirical account. *Policing and Society*, 16(4), 437-460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439460600973420>
- Hopkins, S., & Farley, H. (2014). A prisoners' island: Teaching Australian incarcerated students in the digital age. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 1(1), 42-51.
- Huijser, H., Bedford, T., & Bull, D. (2008). Open courseware, global access and the right to education: Real access or marketing ploy? *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 9(1).
- Huzar, G., & Kassem, H. (2022). Supporting Open University students in prison: a case study. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 23.
- Jewkes, Y. (2005). Men behind bars: "Doing" masculinity as an adaptation to imprisonment. *Men and Masculinities*, 8(1), 44-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X03257452>
- Kasworm, C. E. (2018). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60(2), 143-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609336110>
- Kidd, W. (2020). Empowering adult learners in higher education: Towards a dynamic model of self-determined learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(2), 271-284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1669763>
- Kilty, J. M., & Orsini, M. (2018). Keepin' your head up: Experiences of Black and Indigenous women in prison with mental health issues. *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 27(1), 77-96.
- Kristensen, S. (2001). Learning by Leaving: Towards a Pedagogy for Transnational Mobility in the Context of Vocational Education and Training (VET). *European Journal of Education*, 36(4), 421-430. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-3435.00079>
- Liebling, A. (2011). Moral performance, inhuman and degrading treatment and prison pain. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 530-550. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474511422159>
- Loftus, B. (2008). Dominant culture interrupted: Recognition, resentment and the politics of change in an English police force. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 48(6), 756-777. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azn053>
- Lowe, H., & Cook, A. (2003). Mind the gap: Are students prepared for higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27(1), 53-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770305629>
- Mabunda, P. L. (2010). Information and communication technologies for teaching and learning: Challenges and implications for ODL universities. *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 6(1), 245-258.
- Manger, T., Eikeland, O. J., Diseth, Å., Hetland, H., & Asbjørnsen, A. (2010). Prison inmates' educational motives: Are they pushed or pulled? *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 54(6), 535-547.
- Manger, T., Eikeland, O. J., Diseth, Å., Hetland, H., & Asbjørnsen, A. (2010). Prison inmates' educational motives: Are they pushed or pulled? *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 54(6), 535-547. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2010.522845>
- Manger, T., Eikeland, O. J., Diseth, Å., Hetland, H., & Asbjørnsen, A. (2010). Prison inmates' educational motives: Are they intrinsic, extrinsic or both?. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 54(2), 97-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831003637541>
- Ministry of Justice. (2019). Education and employment strategy 2018-2023. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-and-employment-strategy-2018-to-2023>
- Olson, B. D. (2016). Promoting hope and resilience in individuals and communities following trauma and disaster. *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience*, 18(1), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.4172/1522-4821.1000259>
- Pompoco, A., Wooldredge, J., Lugo, M., Sullivan, C., & Latessa, E. J. (2017). Reducing inmate misconduct and prison returns with facility education programs. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 16(2), 515-547. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12290>

**EXPLORING INCARCERATED STUDENT PRISONERS' EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE MODE OF STUDYING**

*Vimbi Petrus Mahlagu*

- Rabe-Hemp, C. E. (2008). Survival in an "all boys club": Policewomen and their fight for acceptance. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 31(2), 251-270. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13639510810878712>
- Reiman, J., & Leighton, P. (2010). *The rich get richer and the poor get prison: Ideology, class, and criminal justice* (9th ed.). Pearson.
- Rice, J., Emens, J., & Smarr, B. (2023). Despite shutdown hardships, remote learning may support some healthier student sleep behaviors. *Sleep*, 46. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sleep/zsad134>
- Silvestri, M. (2003). *Women in Charge: Policing, Gender and Leadership*. Routledge.
- Smarr, B. L. (2023). Editorial. *Sleep*, 46, 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sleep/zsad134>
- Solbakken, H., & Wynn, R. (2022). *BMC Psychology*, 10(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00889-x>
- Steurer, S. J., & Smith, L. G. (2003). Education reduces crime: Three-state recidivism study. Correctional Education Association.
- Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton University Press.
- Tewksbury, R., & Stengel, K. M. (2006). Assessing correctional education programs: The students' perspective. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 57(1), 13-25.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2017). Reflections on student persistence. *Student Success*, 8(2), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.378>
- Vacca, J. S. (2004). Educated prisoners are less likely to return to prison. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 55(4), 297-305. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23292095>
- Vacca, J. S. (2004). Educated prisoners are less likely to return to prison. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 55(4), 297-305.
- Vacca, J. S. (2004). Educated prisoners are less likely to return to prison. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 55(4), 297-305. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23292095>
- Vinson, T. (2004). *Community adversity and resilience: The distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales and the mediating role of social cohesion*. Jesuit Social Services.
- Vinson, T. (2007). *Dropping off the edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia*. Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia.
- Wah, A. (2021). *Time and the prison experience*. [Unpublished manuscript].
- White, R., & Graham, H. (2010). *Working with offenders: A guide to concepts and practices*. Willan.
- White, R., & Perrone, S. (1997). *Crime and social control*. Oxford University Press.