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Digital Equity in Australian Higher Education: How Prisoners are Missing Out

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Abstract

With the growth in the use of the internet and accompanying digital technologies as part of business as usual for teaching and learning in higher education, there are more opportunities for participation. The rhetoric is that these technologies are able to increase participation by non-traditional cohorts. However, the reality remains that this reliance on connectivity and technology is also preventing many others from participating in higher education. For example, the delivery of course materials and activities exclusively through the internet is problematic, when the distribution of that access is not democratic in itself. Digital equity is a significant human rights issue that needs to be addressed. This paper opens a dialogue about digital equity in teaching and learning in higher education, through the lens of the incarcerated student. While universities move away from delivering printed materials for their remote learners, in every state and territory of Australia, prisoners are prohibited from directly accessing the internet, further disadvantaging this sector of the population. Highlighting this continuing digital divide is crucial to the continuing equitable development of our sector, and for the scholarship of teaching and learning; it is also an issue of humanity. Any serious attempt to encourage disadvantaged cohorts to participate in higher education must include strategies to deal with the continuing marginalisation of students. In the case of incarcerated students, some policy decisions regarding access to the digital environment and its associated hardware may need to be reviewed by correctional jurisdictions. Only in this way will the rhetoric match the reality for the populations who are among our most disadvantaged.

Keywords: Digital equity; higher education; incarcerated students; prisoner education; off-campus learning; eLearning

Introduction

With the rise of the internet and digital technology, the opportunities for remote access and participation in higher education have broadened; yet for many in our community, significant

barriers remain (Anderson, 2015). Digital equity is a significant human rights issue, as is the perpetuation of the digital divide between those who have access and those who do not (La Rue, 2011). For clarity, digital equity relates to both access and inclusion. This paper identifies issues and barriers to accessing higher education that are still present despite technological advances, and pinpoints the implications for teaching and learning in a digital age for one particular cohort: the incarcerated student population. As a case in point, in every state and territory of Australia, prisoners are barred from directly accessing the internet and as universities moves towards online offerings and away from delivering learning materials via the medium of print for their remote learners, access is compounded and this student population is even further disadvantaged (Farley & Willems, 2016).

From the 1980s, the rise of the internet, accompanied by the increased sophistication and pervasiveness of digital technologies, ushered in opportunities for greater participation in higher education by students (Selwyn, 2010). The rhetoric is that electronic access to learning opportunities including course content, materials, learning activities, and participation with peers and teachers, helps to enable students to participate in higher education when they might otherwise be unable to do so. Alongside this, digital access is often signalled as the way in which higher education institutions can enable participation by students who are from non-traditional cohorts (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003; Sims, Vidgen, & Powell, 2008). As a result, students are able to study in a range of modes from full-time or part-time or on-campus or off-campus, and have flexible enrolment options to suit their needs or circumstances. Widening participation has also been enabled through a variety of bridging programs for university entry. In spite of these advances, the necessity of accessing programs via the institution's learning management system (LMS) remains a constant impediment to some, irrespective of their mode of study (Farley, Murphy & Bedford, 2014).

In this way, higher education institutions can claim that they are increasing participation of previously underserved and marginalised groups of students in higher education. These cohorts include mature-aged students who have employment and have carer and/or family responsibilities (Selwyn, 2007). However, this increasing reliance on digital technology for teaching and learning in higher education presupposes ubiquitous connectivity, that is, a reliance on the internet, and appropriate hardware to facilitate this access. For many cohorts, including those in regional and remote Australia, and our prisoners, ubiquitous connectivity is no more than an aspiration (Willems, 2010), or is forbidden (Farley, 2017; Freeman & Park, 2015).

On May 16 2011, the United Nations declared that access to the internet was a human right. That statement has implications for governments in terms of the provision of infrastructure, hardware, social access and so on (La Rue, 2011). Even given this acknowledged right, the harsh reality is that minorities all over the world are accessing the internet at lower rates than those of mainstream users. Some 53 percent of the world's population does not have access to the internet (ICT Data and Statistics Division, 2016). With the increasing internationalisation of education, this is likely to remain a problem for universities into the foreseeable future. This is not just a factor on distant shores as it cannot be assumed that internet access is assured in first-world countries like Australia (Farley & Willems, 2016). At a national level, there are vast tracts of Australia that are neither served by the internet to either the home or via mobile connectivity and reception (Park, 2016). Further, for those who can theoretically access the internet, a certain proportion cannot afford to use it (Wilson, 2013). The internet access plans offered by service providers can be prohibitively expensive for those families with one or no income, who have the burden of high costs of housing, basic utilities, healthcare or childcare. Overlay this with issues of power connectivity or stability, and/or the ability to access computer hardware and software (Willems, 2010), the reality of the barriers start to become apparent. Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are 69 per cent less likely than the non-Indigenous population to have an internet connection and 52 per cent less likely to have a broadband connection (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Though these figures are dated

and no doubt changing, this discrepancy still exists (Rennie, Hogan, Gregory, Crouch, Wright & Thomas, 2016). As such, equity issues remain (Farley, Murphy & Bedford, 2014) and can easily pale into the background with the hype of new digital horizons.

The incarcerated population: A case in point

There are a number of populations at risk in the Australian higher education sector and one who has been often marginalised from participation in higher education is incarcerated students (Farley & Hopkins, 2016). As of 30 June 2016, there were nearly 42,000 adults in Australian prisons, an eight per cent increase from the previous twelve months (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

The Australian prison system is comprised of eighty-five government-operated prisons, nine privately-operated prisons and four transition centres (Institute for Criminal Policy Research, 2015). The operation of each of these prisons is guided by a 2012 publication, *Standard Guidelines for Corrections in Australia* (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2012), published by senior members of state and territory governments responsible for corrections, known as the Australian Correctional Administrators. The *Guidelines* advise individuals and companies who are responsible for the operation and management of Australian prisons, on the broad outcomes and goals to be achieved within and by their prisons (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2012).

The *Guidelines* recognise the link between education and recidivism, stating that one of the guiding principles by which prisoners are managed, is that they should be actively engaged in making positive behaviour changes, and that education is one means of achieving this (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2012). The *Guidelines* indicate that education programs, including vocational education, should be made available to prisoners, and that prisoners undertaking full-time study should be remunerated equally to prisoners undertaking full-time work. Thus, the *Guidelines* make it clear that educating prisoners is important and supported by prisons.

Despite this recognition, the move to teaching off-campus students via Learning Management Systems and online learning has created significant barriers to prisoner access to education beyond the in-house offerings within the prisons. Prisoners in most Australian jurisdictions are prohibited from directly accessing the internet. Universities have largely deserted this cohort due to the difficulties and high costs associated with provisioning them with access to higher education. Given that a post-secondary qualification potentially reduces rates of recidivism by some 40 per cent, it seems this is the cohort most in need of such an education (Davis, Bozick et al., 2013). Indeed, the most disenfranchised group of young people are those that have made an early entry into the criminal justice system and have found themselves in correctional centres serving custodial sentences (Gardner, 2009). This is especially true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are almost 15 times more likely to be incarcerated than other Australians (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2010).

In Australia, the median age of prisoners is 35 years, an increase of 2 years over the past decade (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Young prisoners face an uncertain post-release future due to limited education opportunities and employment discrimination (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011). The link between education and recidivism is well documented. A British study by Hopkins (2012) found that prisoners who had achieved a qualification while in prison were 15 per cent less likely to be reconvicted in the year after release than those who had gained no qualification. Callan & Gardner (2007) provided similar data in an Australian context. They found that in the two years following release from prison, 32 per cent of prisoners who did not undertake VET training during their time in prison were reconvicted and returned

to prison, while only 23 per cent of prisoners who undertook VET training were reconvicted. A more recent Australian study by Giles (2016) also found that the more classes taken while in prison, the less likely it was that people would re-offend upon release.

The situation is even worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that comprise just 2 per cent of the general population, yet 27 percent of the total prisoner population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In many cases, a lack of education may have contributed to their incarceration; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are half as likely as other Australian students to have completed Year 12 (Wong, 2008). Low levels of education remain a key driver of the ongoing cycle that leads to the over-representation of Indigenous Australians in the criminal justice system. And a lack of education will make it even harder for them to secure employment upon release from incarceration in an increasingly tight job market. Even if they do find employment, they are likely to receive lower wages than others of a similar age and background who have not been incarcerated (Visher et al., 2011). This prohibition from prisoners using the internet, coupled with limited or no access to computer hardware and software, ensures that this cohort rarely break the endless cycle of offending and incarceration. Access to higher education is one way in which prisoners could interrupt this cycle (Lee, Farley, Cox & Seymour, 2017).

How incarcerated students currently access education

While all Australian prisoners have their training needs assessed when entering the prison system (Baldry, 2016), prisoners do not have to undertake the training that is recommended to them. They can choose to enrol, or to not enrol, in the available education programs offered. For those prisoners who do choose to study, they have limited options available. Education and training that is typically offered in prison includes a Certificate I in General Education for Adults, which aims to develop basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy. Though prisoner rates of numeracy and literacy are lower than in the general population, the capacity of many prisoners to undertake post-secondary education is frequently underestimated. As a result, there is very often a lack of suitable programs for prisoners, leading to widespread boredom and disengagement (Gillies et al., 2014; Farley & Pike, 2016).

Other vocational education opportunities include entry level certificates in areas such as hospitality, asset maintenance, horticulture and construction. In addition, prisoners can train for a licence in forklift driving and other construction-related licences (Corrections, Prisons & Parole, 2017). These training opportunities are generally outsourced to local tertiary and further education organisations, private registered training organisations, or are offered by in-house teaching staff.

Lack of social capital, limited access to digital technologies, prejudice from correctional officers, educators and administrators, and even families, challenged students' beliefs in their own ability or worthiness to participate in higher education and potentially transform themselves and their lives (Farley & Doyle, 2016). While prison education is often defined and delimited in instrumental terms of employability and efficiency (see, for example, Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2018), the students themselves do not always see it that way. Incarcerated students commonly value education in humanistic, social and personal development terms. When asked why they choose to study, common responses include; 'proving to myself I can do it,' 'being a good role model to my children' and 'keeping my mind learning.' In fact, incarcerated students are far more likely to identify and extol the redemptive and humanistic value of higher education over any perceived economic advantage in a competitive labour market (Farley & Hopkins, 2016).

In Australia, only around 1.7 per cent of eligible prisoners access higher education. This varies significantly across various states and territories with around 6.4 per cent of eligible

Queensland prisoners accessing higher education (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2018). Until very recently, correctional centres in some states were unable to facilitate prisoner enrolment in higher education programs. For example, prisoners in the Northern Territory did not have access to either the technology or to the support that would have enabled them to participate in higher education. In some jurisdictions, prisoners have access to computer labs where eight or ten computers are networked to an isolated server. Hardware and software are typically out of date and poorly maintained. In the Australian Capital Territory, prisoners have access to in-cell computers running on a Linux platform. Certain websites are 'whitelisted,' that is, can be accessed by prisoners but the degree of access is not sufficient for prisoners to undertake university study. This same system does allow limited emails to five email addresses (Farley & Willems, 2017) which enables parents or partners to access materials on behalf of the incarcerated student. In other jurisdictions, education officers would work with prisoners to download course materials and to load them onto correctional centre computers (without access to the internet). Alternative arrangements are sometimes made to accommodate assessments, with education officers searching for and downloading journal articles and other resources that enable prisoners to complete assignments. Correctional centres can be registered as exam centres so that prisoners can complete exams (Farley & Willems, 2017). All of these measures place a considerable burden on both education and custodial staff. They also have implications for sustainability in learning and teaching provision.

The only large-scale project that is currently enabling prisoners to access higher education with technology in Australia is the 'Making the Connection' project, led out of the University of Southern Queensland. To date, this project has enrolled over 1700 prisoners into five programs in Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The project uses two technologies: the first is a server-based solution, and the second, notebook computers that are not able to be connected to the internet. A version of the university's Learning Management System (LMS) which does not rely on internet access is installed onto these technologies to enable access to selected courses and programs (Farley & Willems, 2017).

Discussion

Willems (2010) has identified the compounding issues of equity overlap and the impact that these can have on the successful participation in, and completion of, higher education. With equity centres established in several Australian universities and some federal funding tied to equity targets, there are good social and economic reasons for universities to better serve equity cohorts.

What can universities do to overcome these barriers? There are a number of strategies that can be adopted in order to overcome these inadvertent barriers to digital equity for the incarcerated student population. These include: to provide access to appropriate technologies (and internet); to teach incarcerated students (and education officers) how to use it; to acknowledge and make allowances for deficits in cultural capital; to acknowledge and accommodate greater need for support; and to promote wider stakeholder engagement. These will be explored in greater detail.

First, provision must be made so that these excluded students are able to access the technologies that they need to participate. This would include hardware, software and access to the internet (Farley & Hopkins, 2016; Sims et al., 2008). Though this sounds relatively uncomplicated, there are certain instances where the provision of internet access will just not be possible. For example, it is difficult to imagine a time when incarcerated students in Australian jurisdictions will ever have direct access to the internet.

Second, it is not enough to supply access to the technology to enable participation in eLearning. Those potential students must also be shown how to use the technology if they have never had access to (Sims et al., 2008). As such, scaffolded development of off-campus solutions must be built in to improve participant capacity for success. For example, in the case of incarcerated students, they may have been incarcerated since before a particular technology became available on a mainstream basis. In a University of Southern Queensland pilot project with incarcerated students, some students reported that they had never seen or handled a smart phone (Farley, Murphy & Bedford, 2014). It is also conceivable that a prisoner will have been in custody since before tablets such as iPads became available, or may have never had the financial resources to own one. In summary, before educators can expect a student to deal with this kind of technology, the student must be taught how to use it.

Third, and overlaying the above points as a case in point of equity overlap (Willems, 2010), those who have not previously participated in higher education will not have the requisite cultural capital and will most likely have low educational attainment to this point. For example, a study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015), found that thirty-two per cent of adults entering Australian prisons had completed only Year 9 studies or below, and that only 16 per cent had completed year 12 studies. The Victorian Ombudsman (Glass, 2015) identified that in Victorian prisons in 2013, 59.5 per cent of prisoners had literacy levels that required intensive support. At a national level, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Dawe, 2007) identified that 62 per cent of Australian prisoners had literacy levels that were classified as less than functional. The same is likely to be true of their families and close circle of friends. Pedagogies that are used must take this into account and be appropriate for the cohorts that are to be included (Sims et al., 2008). Being first in the family, especially for distance learners in remote communities, can raise issues of their own (Hopkins & Farley, 2015; Willems, 2010). This can be very difficult to address by universities due to the high level of autonomy and significant workloads of many teaching academics (Sims et al., 2008).

Fourth, it is important to acknowledge and accommodate greater support for these students. This includes such strategies as timely responses from educators to their questions, speedy feedback on assessment submissions, providing an accessible knowledge-base, and the provision of peer support from prisoners who have previously studied to provide the much needed cultural capital. While this may seem to add additional burdens to those providing the education, it can be argued that this support will make a difference.

Fifth, the promotion of wider stakeholder engagement is crucial for success of these disadvantaged student populations. Students are not islands; their success is not solely contingent upon personal attributes and resources. It is also the responsibility of the educators, institution and broader communities in which they learn (Willems, 2012). For the incarcerated population, these include the prisoners, their families and friends, education and custodial officers, communities, educators and universities, correctional jurisdictions, and victims' rights groups. All have a role to play in supporting student participation and success. A key, yet basic tennent is to acknowledge any concerns that the students may have and find means to address them, rather that ignoring them.

Potential solutions such as that offered by the University of Southern Queensland, pre-suppose that access to technologies and the chance to engage with higher education are the main factors preventing these groups from participating (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003). It is most likely that the situation is far more complex. There are likely to be other issues at play such as a lack of appropriate role models, the necessity to work or engage in other activities that compete for the potential student's time, and a whole raft of cultural, social, health and economic issues. Any potential solution will have to involve an active engagement with all stakeholders and a holistic approach to not only dealing with the lack of access to internet and other technologies, but also tackle those social, cultural and other issues which may be at play. Clearly identifying digital equity overlays can help prevent simplistic solutions which may

further disadvantage those attempting to gain access. There is also likely to be heightened needs in terms of support both from a technical point of view and from a personal and educational point of view. Generic skills such as time management, prioritising competing demands and generic writing skills also need to be part of the solution.

Conclusion

Equity considerations are 'wicked' problems in that they are complex issues which will require considered intellectual and financial investment. Highlighting the continuing digital divide, particularly in disadvantaged cohorts such as the prison population, is crucial to the continuing equitable development of our sector; it is also an issue of humanity. Though the rhetoric is that eLearning is able to increase participation in higher education by non-traditional cohorts, the reality is that it is also preventing many of those people from participating. Delivery of course materials and activities through the learning management system and through the internet is problematic, when the distribution of that access is not democratic in itself. Many minority groups, including the incarcerated student population, are able to access the internet and all that it opens up at a significantly lower rate to that of mainstream users. This can be both because of the lack of access to the appropriate technologies (including the internet), or because of the costs associated with that access are prohibitive, or both. Even given this lack of access, there may be a large number of other factors at play which combine to decrease participation of marginalised cohorts in higher education.

Any serious attempt to encourage such cohorts to participate in higher education via eLearning must also include strategies to deal with other sources of disenfranchisement which may be due to cultural, social, economic or health issues. In the case of incarcerated students, some policy decisions regarding access to the digital environment and its associated hardware may also need to be reviewed. Only in this way will the experienced reality begin to match the rhetoric for the student populations who are among our most disadvantaged.

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