

MEDIA RELEASE: Uni course sparks learning in inmates

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A partnership between Parklea Correctional Centre and Australian Catholic University (ACU) has ignited a thirst for learning in inmates who are discovering new possibilities for their lives outside prison.

ACU has partnered with MTC Australia to deliver the Clemente Australia program to minimum security inmates at Parklea. Clemente began in the United States in 1995 and was adopted by ACU in 2003 as an initiative of mission at several campuses, including the ACU Blacktown Campus near Parklea in 2020.

It is aimed at individuals whose education has been disrupted, including migrants, prisoners, those with health issues or people experiencing homelessness, to break the cycle of inequality and social injustice.

Students undertake a university-level Certificate in Liberal Arts, studying subjects such as philosophy, literature, history, sociology and politics. They learn skills such as critical thinking, researching and writing essays through the completion of four humanities units. It also teaches them to think about themselves and their environment and provides a pathway to re-engage with education.

The inmates at Parklea started the pilot program last year, studying Global History for the first unit and Sociology for the second. The pilot was deemed such a success, they will now move on to Philosophy in Semester One this year.

The students are mentored by volunteer Learning Partners who help them with their studies and writing essays.

Once they pass all four units and receive their certificate, they are able to continue their studies at university. If they leave prison before they finish the course, they can complete their studies through ACU.

Parklea Governor Wayne Taylor said education played an important role in reducing reoffending, as it provided inmates with better employment opportunities and improved their self-esteem.

“We are always looking for new ways to make a positive impact on the lives of the men in our care and education is an important tool to achieve that,” Mr Taylor said.

“So when the ACU told us about the Clemente program, we were keen to run a pilot with some of our inmates.

“The program has been deemed a success by everyone involved and the men are keen to continue the course.”

ACU Clemente Coordinator and course lecturer Youssef Taouk said the experience had been very positive, as the inmates were very inquisitive and enthusiastic to learn.

“It can be very intimidating to enrol in a uni course, but they showed bravery, persistence and resilience in coming every week,” Youssef said.

“They didn’t have access to us all the time, but they used all the resources we gave them, and they took the initiative to start a study group outside class twice a week.

“This is the ideal class I like to have; they have a lot of initiative and they took everything I taught them on board.

“Some of them are already talking about further study and I think they will have bright futures in academia if they choose to.”

Jason* was one of six students to pass the first unit and he is keen to finish the final three.

He said doing the Clemente course provided the men in his class options to pursue outside prison.

“Learning is a good thing, but a lot of us never had the opportunity on the outside.

“We have the opportunity in gaol to learn and Clemente gives us a pathway and builds confidence and courage.

“Taking our minds back to learning made us feel young again and helps us in so many ways.

“I want to continue with Clemente and further education when I get out. I’m interested in business studies.”

Jason said he would encourage other inmates to participate in the program.

“If you want to find out what you’re capable of and are serious about it, have a go.

“A group of us got together after class for study sessions and every day we evolved. We inspired and encouraged each other, which gave us the motivation to keep going.

“The uni ran it great, and they taught us a lot. They gave us time and patience and they gave us their heart. They are beautiful people.”

Parklea has been operated by MTC Australia on behalf of Corrective Services NSW since April 2019.

*Name has been changed.

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