

## **Tertiary Education Behind Bars: Access Opportunities to Prison Inmates in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

The collaboration between the Malaysian Prison Department and Open University Malaysia (OUM) represents a progressive and forward-thinking approach to inmate rehabilitation. Providing access to tertiary education for inmates not only equips them with valuable knowledge and skills but also instills a sense of purpose and hope for the future. Education can serve as a catalyst for personal growth, self-improvement, and the development of positive attitudes and behaviors. A sample of 37 respondents from a total of 83 prisoners-students are involved in this study. Factor analysis was utilised to identify if student attribute, social influence and financial aid influenced prison inmates' decision to pursue Open University Malaysia's programmes in prisons. Results of the multiple linear regression indicated that there was a significant effect between student attributes and decision to study, which means that inmates' own characteristics will motivate them to continue learning which can lead to future success in their pursuit for excellence in tertiary education. The significant effect found between student attributes and the decision to study underscores the importance of individual characteristics in motivating inmates to engage in educational programmes. This understanding can help tailor educational initiatives to better meet the diverse needs and motivations of incarcerated individuals, ultimately enhancing their chances of successful reintegration into society upon release. The findings of this study not only

contribute to our understanding of correctional education but also highlight the potential of such programmes in fostering personal growth and reducing repetition rates. By providing inmates with the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills, initiatives like those offered by OUM can empower them to build brighter futures for themselves post-incarceration and setting a positive example for similar initiatives around the world.

**Keywords:** Prison Inmates, Student Attributes, Social Influence, Financial Aid, Tertiary Education

### **Introduction**

Through literatures, it can be seen that by equipping inmates with the necessary skills and knowledge, correctional education programmes aim to facilitate successful reintegration of inmates into society and reduce recidivism rates. Watts (2010) highlights the overarching goal of correctional education as preparing inmates for a "good and useful life" upon release. By empowering inmates to lead productive and law-abiding lives post-release, such initiatives contribute to community safety and well-being.

The study conducted by Letlhoyo and Makande (2021) further reinforces the economic benefits associated with prison education programmes. By facilitating the full rehabilitation of inmates and equipping them with marketable skills, these programmes not only increase individuals' employability but also enable them to contribute positively to the economy upon their return to their communities.

Overall, the literature highlights the instrumental role of education in promoting rehabilitation, reducing recidivism, and fostering economic empowerment within the prison setting. By investing in educational initiatives for inmates, societies can realise significant social and economic dividends while promoting principles of justice, dignity, and human rights.

Bayliss (2003) highlights how prison education encourages negotiation, choice, and the development of critical thinking skills among participants. By fostering self-confidence and self-worth, these programmes aim to empower inmates to take ownership of their education and personal development. This not only enhances their prospects for successful reintegration into society but also contributes to their overall well-being and resilience. Christopher A. Moore & Matseliso Mokhele's study (2017) further emphasizes the awareness among participants of the personal and professional benefits derived from prison education experiences. By acknowledging the transformative potential of education, inmates are more likely to actively engage in learning opportunities and capitalise on the skills and knowledge acquired during their incarceration.

Letlhoyo and Makande (2021) highlight the positive impact of educational programmes on the rehabilitation of young learner-inmates, despite acknowledging that these programmes are not without challenges. By nurturing inmates' educational qualifications, these programmes contribute to social leveling, providing individuals with the tools they need to succeed in both personal and professional spheres. The goal of prison education, as articulated by Anne OG & Paul (2019), is to promote social, economic, and cultural transformation, ultimately leading to enhanced social citizenship, economic opportunities, and individual empowerment. By offering opportunities for higher education, prison education programmes not only equip

inmates with valuable skills and qualifications but also instill a sense of agency and possibility for the future.

The objective of Malaysian Prison Department's towards this idea can be seen through its client charter where one of it is to provide an integrated rehabilitation programme to all residents on the basis of the Human Development Plan of the Prison Department. However, Agba et al (2020) mentioned that in many cases there seem to be no synergy between educational programmes offered in prison and those outside prison.

The collaboration between the Malaysian Prison Department and Open University Malaysia (OUM) in offering higher education programs to inmates is indeed a significant and innovative initiative aimed at promoting equity and value among this socially-challenged group. By providing access to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within the prison setting, this collaboration recognises the importance of tertiary education in empowering individuals and facilitating their reintegration into society. The face-to-face tutorials conducted by OUM instructors allow inmates to receive personalised support and guidance, enhancing their learning experience and academic success. Moreover, the utilisation of OUM's online learning management system enables inmates to manage their studies efficiently, submit assignments, and access a wealth of digital resources through the online library. This blended learning approach not only accommodates the unique constraints of the prison environment but also equips inmates with valuable digital literacy skills that are increasingly essential in today's workforce.

Overall, the collaboration between the Malaysian Prison Department and OUM represents a commendable effort. In the very beginning, OUM collaborated with the Integrity School in Kajang, a school established in 2008 through a collaboration between the Malaysian Prison Department and the Ministry of Education Malaysia. At present, there are nine Integrity Schools in Malaysia, namely Sekolah Integriti Sungai Petani Kedah, Sekolah Integriti Puncak Alam Selangor, Sekolah Integriti Marang Terengganu, Sekolah Integriti Keluang Johor, Sekolah Integriti Kota Kinabalu Sabah, Sekolah Integriti (Women) Kota Kinabalu Sabah, Sekolah Integriti Kuching Sarawak, Sekolah Integriti Muar Johor and Sekolah Integriti Bentong Pahang. The students in integrity schools are young offenders aged between 15 to 21 years old and are able to obtain primary and secondary education although they are behind bars (Jabatan Penjara Malaysia, 2020).

*High achievers obtaining all As in Integrity Schools for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) 2023 would be encouraged to pursue higher education through partnerships with several universities and colleges.*

~ Hafidz Osman, Prisons Inmate Management Director Commissioner  
May 27, 2024, The STAR

As a leading open and distance learning (ODL) institution in Malaysia, OUM has moved away from traditional pedagogies to offer an innovative education model through a partnership with the Malaysian Prisons Department, serving this disadvantaged group since 2008. A total of 83 prison inmates have participated in this programme, with 24 graduating from OUM's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Currently, 20 are actively pursuing their education, 7 are dormant, and 32 have discontinued for various reasons. Instructors conduct face-to-face tutorials within the prison, supported by OUM's online learning management

system, where inmates manage their studies, submit assignments, and access digital resources.

The objectives of this study is to determine the factors influencing students' decision to pursue higher education. The findings of this study can be utilised by the Malaysian prison authorities as well as OUM to understand and distinguish between the factors, since each has an impact on inmates' decision to continue their education. This study may also be useful and consistent with the Malaysian Prisons Department's mission and vision, as the country's correctional agency, which is to provide effective rehabilitation programmes, in addition to providing a secure place of detention for inmates. Prison officials see education as the most important tool for rehabilitating inmates to become better people while incarcerated.

The Malaysian Prisons Department can rely on the support of relevant governmental agencies, such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Home Affairs, State Religious Departments, and supports from other organisations that deal directly or indirectly with the inmates' interests and rights.

This research on the collaboration between the Malaysian Prison Department and Open University Malaysia (OUM) not only benefits the inmates and their families but also extends to prison administrators and policymakers. For prison administrators, this research provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of educational initiatives within the prison setting. By understanding the factors influencing inmates' decisions to pursue higher education programmes, administrators can tailor rehabilitation programmes to better meet the needs and motivations of the inmates. By prioritising funding and support for educational initiatives within the prison system, policymakers can contribute to positive social outcomes, including reduced crime rates, and improved public safety.

### **Literature Review**

Statistics from Malaysian Prison authorities point out that the daily cost of prisoners ranges from RM38 to RM41, including the cost of amenities and wages for prison officers. On average, the minimum daily cost involved for 65,222 prisoners will be at least over RM2.4 million (Malay Mail, 2019).

In order to reduce the number of repeat offenders, the government (through OUM) has started tertiary education programmes aimed at upskilling prison inmates and providing them with sufficient knowledge so that they may be better equipped to secure proper employment or become entrepreneurs. Education and training have been shown to bring other, non-financial, benefits to society such as improved health and reduced national crime and drug use (Tabatha, 2016). Prison-based education programmes which focuses on helping inmates obtain career/technical programme certificates, diploma, degree and/or master's degrees reduce prison misconduct and recidivism (Duwe, 2018).

This enables inmates to seek a legally permissible livelihood for themselves and their family. Education benefits individuals impacted by incarceration, and that makes society safer. By allowing people who want to turn their lives around the opportunity to do so, we all profit. It may serve to reduce repeat offenders. If so, the financial strain of operating and maintaining a prison and associated legal personnel can be significantly reduced.

Expenditure of time and money on education is seen as an 'investment' because it generates future income (Ramlee et. al., 2016).

This research looked at underpinning theories that are related to attitude and planned behaviour and deemed relevant for this study. The purpose of this section is to identify the theories that are closely related to the framework in order to conduct the study. The purpose of having a theory is to explain a situation. As explained by Stewart et al (2011), a theory is:

- a) an explanation of how and why things are as they are;
- b) what it intends to explain; and
- c) something which implies a phenomenon separate to and independent of the theory.

Hence, a theory only has meaning in the context in which it plays a part. Therefore, it is important and critical to identifying theories that help guide the research by testing the variables in a particular situation. In investigating or understanding human behaviour, it is true that the researcher has to recognise the diversity of human behaviour and characteristics. Hence, to further understand human behaviour, we have to first compare and contrast the theories of human adoption behaviour (Rehman & Dost, 2013). Based on the above factors and considerations, the following sections review theories related to behaviour and their relevance to this study.

### **Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholder Theory (ST) is a theory founded by R. Edward Freeman in 1984 and interconnects the relationship between an organisation and its interested parties. ST is a theory that requires the management to give due consideration to groups or individuals who are interested in the progress of the organisation. Stakeholders are individuals or groups without any clear membership conditions (Freeman, 1994) that have a legitimate interest in the procedural and/or functional activity of the organisation and looks at the stakeholder's intrinsic values (Gooyert et al., 2017). Typically, in an organisation, the parties interested in the organisation will be the owners and shareholders. ST stresses that besides owners and shareholders, there are other parties who are interested in the organisation and must be given priority in order for organisations to achieve its goal. According to the ST, stakeholders play a significant role in constructively contributing to the progress of the organisation by giving input that is relevant to the organisation's processes and activities. The role of ST is to address an issue involving an essential partner to ensure there is no serious harm caused to both the stakeholder and the organisation.

### **The Theory of Planned Behaviour: From Intentions to Actions**

Ajzen and Fishbein (2000) suggests that behaviour is a function of relevant information, or beliefs, which relates towards behaviour. This theory become popular because it suits in a wide range of fields such as psychology, social sciences and economics. TPB was further developed by Fishbein and Ajzen when they added a control variable to measure intention and behaviour. The TPB has three prominent factors which are attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. These variables emphasise on the actual behaviour instead of intention and are based on the principle that individuals will make a logical and reasoned decision to perform a certain behaviour by evaluating the information available to them before making a decision. For adult learning to occur, an individual's motivation to

participate in educational activities is influenced by a set of determinants, starting with an intention, then a desire, and eventually actual attendance in a course (Sarri et al., 2013).

One of the most important goals of any prison is to help the prisoners change their criminal behaviour and avoid re-offending after release. Positive attitudes among prisoners are important in securing the effectiveness of various correctional rehabilitation programmes and the successful reintegration of prisoners into the society after release. As such, this research intends to investigate the attitudes among prison inmates. Participation in prison education is tied closely to inmates' aspirations, not just for resettlement after release but also for making their everyday lives in prison more humane, and their educational and professional backgrounds heavily influence it (Panitsides & Moussiou, 2019).

Based on the literature above, this study has adopted three factors namely student attribute, social influence and financial aid which serve as the independent variables. Meanwhile, intention to pursue higher education serves as the dependent variable.

#### *Student attribute*

H1 : There is a positive relationship between student attribute and intention to study

The relationship between student attributes and study intention is significant. According to studies, a student's desire to learn can be influenced by motivation, self-efficacy, personality traits, goal orientation, and sociocultural influences (Opoku et al., 2023). Meanwhile Cater et al (2022) suggested that the students who are conscientious and open to new experiences, for instance, are more likely to pursue higher education. So are students who are ambitious and self-sufficient. Additionally, Bakhshian & Lee (2023) suggest that students who choose learning over grades are more likely to be interested in study. The attitudes and motives of students toward education can also be influenced by cultural and socioeconomic variables. It is crucial for educators and institutions to comprehend this relationship because it can assist them in developing settings that support student engagement, motivation, and academic performance.

#### *Social influence*

H2 : There is a positive relationship between social influence and intention to study

The relationship between social influence and intention to study is a compelling subject within the realm of educational psychology. Kosiba et al (2022) suggested that social influence, such as from peers, family, and society, has a powerful impact on students' intention to study. Positive social influences, such as support from peers and family, can motivate students to study by providing a good learning environment and a sense of accountability (Aliedan et al., 2023). In contrast, negative social influences, such as peer pressure or societal expectations, can discourage students from prioritizing their studies. It is important to pay attention towards social influence for educators and politicians who wish to encourage positive peer relationships and create a supportive social climate that supports students' desire to study and achieve their academic goals.

#### *Financial aid*

H3 : There is a positive relationship between financial aid and intention to study



The relationship between financial aid and intention to study is complex and multifaceted. Reducing the cost of education is one of the most straightforward ways that financial aid can affect the intention to study (Dynarsky et al., 2022). This is crucial for low-income students, as they might not otherwise be able to afford to attend college. Tung et al (2021) suggested students are more likely to enroll in college and continue their education when they have access to financial aid. Financially independent students are better equipped to concentrate on their academics and meet their academic objectives. Financial aid can also assist students in lowering their levels of anxiety and tension, which can enhance their academic performance. Numerous studies have shown that financial assistance has a positive impact on students' intention to study, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Overall, the findings show how crucial financial assistance is in promoting students' willingness to learn and pursue higher education (Idres et al., 2019). By reducing the expense of attending college, raising students' academic achievement, and reducing stress, financial aid can contribute to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed in college.

### **Methodology**

A mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to collect data. The sample method used in this study is cluster sampling with a probability sampling methodology. This cluster sampling ensures that diverse groups in the population are sufficiently represented in the sample, allowing them to estimate parameters with greater accuracy. Cluster sampling is based on the notion of using available information on the population 'to divide it into groups such that the elements within each group are more alike than are the elements in the population as a whole' (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996).

As at April 2024, a cumulative total of 83 prison inmates have registered for OUM programmes since 2008. 24 have successfully graduated, 20 are continuing their studies to higher levels, 1 has completed his PhD studies and is waiting for his Viva Voce, 7 students have decided to be dormant and 32 stopped pursuing their studies momentarily. Programmes pursued are the Diploma in Management (DIM), Bachelor in Business Administration (Hons) (BBA), Bachelor of Political Science (BPS), Masters in Business Administration (MBA) and Doctor of Philosophy in Business Administration (PhD BA). More have applied to pursue their studies at OUM.

The research instrument is a cross-sectional self-administrated questionnaire which was distributed to the respondents in the form of survey using scale points. The selected prisons were in Kajang in the state of Selangor, and Kota Kinabalu in Sabah. This research also used structured interviews as a method to obtain accurate and maximum amount of information from the participants which can be otherwise unavailable.

### **Data Analysis & Findings**

This study seeks to benefit various stakeholder groups. The government of Malaysia, the Justice Department and the Prison Department will gain better understanding about the benefit of offering tertiary education in prison. The financial costs and benefits in monetary terms) and non-financial costs saved (opportunity cost, reduction of workload of existing staff, reduction of cost of recruitment and selection of prospective staff, reduction of anxiety and work related stress, tax savings etc.) will be clearly depicted.

Using questionnaires based on literature reviews to gather data is a common and effective method in research, especially when exploring complex phenomena such as the factors influencing inmates' decisions to pursue higher education programs. Employing factor analysis and reliability tests to identify relevant factors or variables, as well as to assess the validity and reliability of the instrument, ensures that the research findings are robust and trustworthy.

With 37 respondents completing and returning the survey questionnaires, the study can still yield valuable insights, especially if the sample is representative and well-selected. Analyzing the data using statistical software like SPSS 20.0 allows for rigorous examination and interpretation of the results, enabling researchers to draw meaningful conclusions from the collected data.

The demographic feedback provided by the respondents offers valuable insights into the characteristics of the study sample and can help contextualize the findings of the research.

Age distribution among the participants indicates that the majority of respondents fall within the 26 to 30 years old age group, comprising 32.4% of the sample. This age range is significant as it represents a stage in life where individuals may be seeking opportunities for personal and professional development, making it relevant to explore their attitudes and motivations towards pursuing higher education even within the prison setting.

Regarding marital status, the data show that a significant proportion of the prison inmates are single, accounting for 67.6% of the sample. This demographic information is pertinent as it may influence individuals' priorities, responsibilities, and support networks, all of which can impact their decision-making processes regarding education and rehabilitation.

Furthermore, the education level of the respondents reveals that nearly one-third of the participants (29.7%) have tertiary education. This finding is noteworthy as it suggests a diverse range of educational backgrounds among the study sample, which can influence their perceptions, attitudes, and readiness to engage in higher education programmes offered within the prison system.

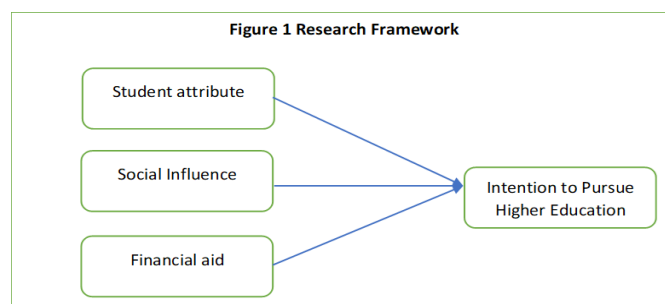


Figure 1 Research Framework

As seen in Figure 1, this study aimed to investigate if these three factors (student attribute, social influence and financial aid) influenced prison inmates' intention to pursue higher education. Referring to Table 1, results of the multiple linear regression indicated that there



was a significant effect between student attribute and intention to study ( $F(3, 33) = 8.04$ ,  $p < .001$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .37$ ). This means that students' own characteristics will motivate themselves to continue learning which can lead to future success in higher education.

Table 1  
*Regression Result*

Hypothesis	Regression Weights	Beta Coefficient	$R^2$	F	t-value	p-value	Hypotheses Supported
H1	SA → INT	0.613	0.37	8.04	2.64	0.013	Yes
H2	SI → INT	0.374			2.512	0.103	No
H3	FA → INT	0.127			5.917	0.196	No

The individual predictors were examined further and student attributes ( $t = 2.64$ ,  $p = .013$ ) were found to be significant predictors in the model. Meanwhile, for the other two variables, social influence ( $t = 2.512$ ,  $p = 0.103$ ) and financial aid ( $t = 5.917$ ,  $p = 0.196$ ) were found to not significant in the model.

This proves that student attributes (such as willingness to learn something new, seeking different skills, commitment for lifelong learning, having educational goals for self-improvement, hope to obtain better grades in current study, mastering skills taught in class, believing in own power to achieve one's educational goal and believing in oneself to be successful in higher education) is a significant predictor in the intention to study among prison inmates in Malaysia.

### Discussion

The findings of the study indeed have significant implications for both current and former prison inmates, as well as their families and society at large. By understanding how tertiary education and acquired learning skills can positively impact individuals' lives post-release, stakeholders can better appreciate the value of investing in educational initiatives within the prison system.

The tertiary education provided by OUM in the prison is not free but all other additional skills received by prison inmates are paid for by the government, such as computer application skills, writing skills, study method skills and competency skills. For prison inmates, the opportunity to access tertiary education and additional skills training can be transformative. Beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills, these programmes contribute to the development of self-confidence, motivation, and a sense of purpose. Equipped with valuable qualifications and competencies, former inmates are better positioned to secure employment opportunities upon reintegration into society. This not only improves their own standard of living but also enhances their ability to contribute positively to their families and communities.

Moreover, the economic benefits ripple outwards, benefiting not only the individual and their immediate family but also extending to broader society. The higher earning potential of former inmates translates into increased purchasing power, improving the overall economic well-being of their households. Additionally, the resulting increase in tax revenue

contributes to government coffers, enabling further investment in social programmes and initiatives aimed at addressing underlying issues related to crime and incarceration.

Overall, the provision of tertiary education by OUM within the prison system represents a sound investment in human capital and social welfare. By empowering individuals with the tools they need to succeed, such initiatives pave the way for a more inclusive and prosperous society.

### **Contribution of this Study**

The findings of the above study carry significant contextual and practical contributions. This study benefits society at large by being instrumental in transforming prison inmates into law abiding citizens who are better able to serve the economy as educated professionals. Members of the public can face less fear, less offenses, less stress and anxiety of confronting repeat offenders. The higher level of safety in the environment will benefit many layers of society. This value leads to higher levels of confidence and better acceptance of released prison inmates back in society.

Lastly, this study will benefit the academic staff and non-academic staff at OUM who have been instrumental in providing tertiary education to prison inmates. The demands for tertiary education in detention centers have generated employment, work opportunities and improvement to open and distance learning programmes. As a result, OUM is able to constantly monitor and upgrade their tertiary education programmes and play a vital role in human capital development. Tertiary education by OUM staff can help transform prison inmates into skilled human capital who are competent and able to contribute to the economy. Tertiary education can successfully achieve greater benefits in positively transforming the minds of prison inmates in addition to laws, regulation and punitive measures.

### **Conclusion**

OUM has developed and shared best practices that can be adopted by any university or college aiming to establish a unique partnership with their country's Prisons Department. Through the cultivation of these kinds of collaborations, organizations can leave a long-lasting, sustainable mark on this underprivileged neighborhood, providing inmates with the skills and information they need to turn their lives around and become productive members of society again after their release. This program serves as evidence of the significant impact that compassion and education can have, encouraging other establishments to take a similar approach and support the goals of rehabilitation and reintegration. Universities and colleges may lead the way in social change by accepting these partnerships and stepping up to drive a movement that improves lives, fortifies communities, and creates a more promising future that includes everyone.

This programme is part of an economic empowerment initiative aimed at rehabilitating inmates and creating job opportunities upon their release. Education in the prison is a great way to rehabilitate and prepare them for life after their release. If an inmate leaves with the same skills he had before entering prison, it is highly likely that he will take up his old law-breaking activities. This is something we must think about in ensuring that higher education is truly available for all, even to those confined within prison walls (Raghavan, 2022). OUM is

currently engaging with various stakeholders—including ministries, the public, potential employers, and industries—to create awareness and expand and enhance this initiative.

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