An Evaluation of
The Koori Cognitive Skills
Program Pilots

for Corrections Victoria

Plain Language
Statement

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This Statement is an abridged version of the Report’s main findings. Atkinson Kerr and Associates recommends that it not be taken as a substitute and should be read in conjunction with the main Report.

**PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT**

This report evaluates the Koori Cognitive Skills Program (CSP) for Corrections Victoria. Research has shown that people who get into trouble with the law often have difficulty solving problems in their everyday lives. The Koori CSP has been designed to help Koori prisoners strengthen these skills, to reduce their risk of re-offending. This is important, given that Indigenous people are greatly over-represented in the Victorian correctional system.

The Koori CSP is based on a mainstream program (the McGuire Offence-Focused Problem Solving Program) originally developed in the United Kingdom. The program has been adapted by a Koori registered psychologist to make it more appropriate for Koori men and women in Victoria’s correctional system. It consists of 30 two-hour sessions. All sessions and activities are described in a program manual for facilitators.

Between April and August 2005, the Koori CSP has been piloted at three prison locations in Victoria: a group of ten men at Loddon, nine men at Barwon and five women at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (DPFC). There were two facilitators at each location; a non-Koori psychologist who was based at the prison, and a Koori community Elder. Program Support Officers (PSOs) were also involved. At Loddon, the PSOs were prison officers, while at Barwon it was the Indigenous Services Officer and at DPFC it was the Aboriginal Wellbeing Officer who had this role.

This evaluation of those pilot programs has been done by two researchers, one Koori and one non-Koori, within a partnership framework. We looked closely at the three pilot programs, by asking five research questions.

**Our first question was:** To what extent was the Koori CSP run the way it was designed to be run?

Our findings were overall positive. For example on average 91% of the participants attended the program sessions. Facilitators found most sessions quite easy to run. Approximately three quarters of all the program’s activities were run as per the program manual. Some activities, however, were missed out due to lack of time, and some were run in a different way. There was also some important missing information in the program records kept by the facilitators.

**Our second question was:** To what extent did the participants actually learn the skills that were taught in the program?

Our findings were mixed. A questionnaire that compared participants’ answers to some problem-solving questions before and after the program showed basically no difference. Videotapes of group members actually practicing the skills in the sessions were not complete enough for us to draw confident conclusions. Based on the limited
video material we had, it looked the skills were being demonstrated at quite a high level even by the middle of the program.

**Our third question was: What can we learn about this program from the facilitators?**

Our interviews with the facilitators provided a lot of information:

- At all locations, facilitators settled into their roles and were able to sort out any tensions that arose. They reported that a positive group ‘vibe’ quickly formed between the group members, which was overall stronger than in the mainstream CSPs they had run before, with mostly non-Koori prisoners. Participants were keen to be part of the Koori CSP, and were concerned about anything that might stop it from continuing.

- Group members appreciated most cultural activities in the program, such as talking circles and traditional craft activities. A few cultural processes such as using a talking stick were considered inappropriate for some group members because of where they came from, and this needed to be worked out by each group. Participants especially liked ‘hands-on’ ways of learning, such as roleplays, discussions, music, videos and pictures. Written work was strongly disliked by all the groups, and was overall counterproductive. Many other ways of learning the material were suggested.

- Men and women reacted differently to some parts of the program. Family violence was a difficult topic for all participants, but especially the men. Also, the women were overall more able than the men to apply the skills they were learning to real-life situations in their personal lives.

- There were serious concerns from all facilitators about expecting participants to behave differently on the ‘outside’ when there had been no change to support them in their homes and communities. In other words, the program was seen as running a risk of setting the participants up to fail after being released from prison. This pointed to how important it is for participants to be linked into other services besides the CSP to help address their family and community concerns.

- Facilitators said they would like more than two and a half days of Koori-specific training to help them prepare to run the program.

- All facilitators found it very useful to talk with each other before and after each session for planning and debriefing. The Koori facilitators were less likely to use more formal types of supervision compared to the non-Koori facilitators, and overall saw it as being less necessary.

**Our fourth question was: What can we learn about this program from the prison administration?**

We spoke with Programs Managers and Senior Psychologists. All said it had been a very positive experience for the Koori participants, and also a positive opportunity for the prison to address Koori prisoners’ needs. Here are some of their most important comments:

- It was especially helpful at Loddon to have prison officers involved as PSOs because it improved relationships and cultural understanding

- There was a need for facilitators’ roles to be more clearly defined, and for Koori facilitators to be given more information about how things work in the prisons

- Some Koori facilitators were not always able to get to the prisons when they were needed for the program
There were problems getting suitable space for program sessions
There were tensions at times between the Koori CSP and other programs such as Industries
A small number of prison staff had negative attitudes towards the program to start with, though this improved as the program got underway
There were some concerns about the relationship between the Koori CSP and other programs at the prisons.
Many suggestions were offered to help address these issues.

Our final question was: What can we learn about this program from the participants themselves?

While meeting directly with the participants would have given us the best information, for this study we had to rely on survey responses and comments from the facilitators. About half the surveys were filled in. The responses were very positive. All participants who did the survey said the program had been useful for them, enjoyable and well-organised. Many also said it was helping them with their everyday concerns, and could help them not re-offend in the future. More than half also said they might now try other prison programs, especially if they include Koori facilitators and cultural approaches.

Based on these findings, we have made a range of recommendations. Our most important recommendation is that the program continues to be supported by Corrections Victoria. We also recommended that some further changes be made to the program, especially in the following areas:

- More cultural input into some sessions
- The program could be slightly longer, with a break in the middle
- Careful decisions about how participants are selected for the program
- Guidelines for future evaluations
- More strategies to prepare the prisons for this program
- Additional ideas for selecting and supporting facilitators
- More supervision for facilitators
- Connecting more strongly with other prison-based programs
- Connecting more strongly with programs in the community
- Building a stronger relationship between the Department of Justice Indigenous Issues Unit and Corrections Victoria.

The final section of the Koori Cognitive Skills Evaluation Report provides these recommendations in full.