

DIGITAL LEARNING AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN NIGERIAN CUSTODIAL CENTRES: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS, IMPACT AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The integration of digital learning and vocational training in Nigerian custodial centres plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates into society. This paper examines the role of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and national examinations such as West African Examinations Council (WAEC), National Examinations Council (NECO) and Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB) in enhancing educational opportunities for inmates in custodial facilities. Furthermore, it explores vocational training initiatives—ranging from carpentry and welding to bakery and confectionery—aimed at equipping inmates with employable skills. The study evaluates the effectiveness of these programmes within the framework of the Good Lives Model (GLM) and the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, which provide theoretical insights into rehabilitation strategies. Despite the promising impact of these rehabilitation programmes, challenges such as infrastructure deficits, security concerns and funding limitations hinder their optimal implementation. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen educational and vocational interventions and promote sustainable inmate reintegration.

I. INTRODUCTION

On the 31st day of July 2019, the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) succeeded the former Nigerian Prisons Service, which was established in 1861. Through the enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) Act 2019, the federal government of Nigeria mandated a comprehensive rehabilitation framework for all categories of inmates. This legislative reform marked a paradigm shift from punitive detention toward a rehabilitative model that emphasizes reintegration. Section 14 of the Act mandates the provision of educational and vocational training opportunities, including modern agricultural techniques, to facilitate the reformation of inmates. Specifically, Section 14 (1) – (3) states that:

14. — (1) The Correctional Service shall provide opportunities for education, training vocational training, as well as training in modern farming techniques and animal husbandry for inmates.
- (2) In accordance with the provisions of subsection (1), Correctional Service shall establish and run, in designated Custodial Centres, industrial centres equipped with modern facilities for the enhancement of vocational skills training for inmates aimed at facilitating their reintegration into society.
- (3) Subsections (1) and (2) shall be administered to encourage generation of funds to aid the earning scheme for the inmates, aftercare and other support services towards their rehabilitation.

In addition, Section 10 of the Act expands the responsibilities of custodial centres to include a broad range of rehabilitative services, from risk assessment to behavioural modification and income generation, all aimed at transforming inmates into law-abiding citizens.

As of 28 July 2025, Nigeria's custodial centres house 81,593 inmates, with a disproportionate male-to-female ratio of 98:2 and a convict-to-awaiting-trial ratio of nearly 3.7. In the face of overcrowding and resource limitations, digital education and vocational training have emerged as viable strategies for fostering reform

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and reducing recidivism among offenders. However, the successful implementation of these programmes is dependent on adequate infrastructure, funding and conscientious policy execution.

Drawing on over 16 years of professional experience in correctional facility management, rehabilitation programmes implementation and security classifications across multiple states (Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja, Lagos, Kano, Nasarawa and Oyo states) in Nigeria, this study provides a critical assessment of rehabilitation initiatives, highlighting their impacts, theoretical foundations and implementation challenges.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR REHABILITATION

A. Good Lives Model (GLM)

The GLM is a strengths-based rehabilitation approach that emphasizes enhancing inmates' capabilities to achieve meaningful lives through education and skills development. By focusing on inmates' individual goals and values, the GLM promotes prospective reintegration and pro-social identity formation, ultimately reducing recidivism.

B. Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Framework

The RNR model underscores the importance of adapting rehabilitation efforts based on an individual's risk level, criminogenic needs and cognitive abilities. Through targeted educational and vocational interventions, correctional authorities can optimize rehabilitation outcomes, ensuring that resources are allocated to inmates most likely to benefit from structured learning.

C. Integrated Model

The rehabilitation programmes implemented by NCoS often exhibit conceptual heterogeneity, integrating elements of both the RNR model and the GLM. This lack of clarity may compromise the efficacy of the programmes, potentially leading to below average outcomes. Furthermore, this conceptual ambiguity can undermine the effectiveness of programme implementation, creating inconsistencies in inmate treatment and rehabilitation.

III. DIGITAL LEARNING IN CUSTODIAL CENTRES

A. National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

NOUN operates study centres within several custodial centres (the author's first experience with NOUN was in Maximum Security Custodial Centre (MaxSCC), Kirikiri, Lagos, Nigeria), offering inmates opportunities to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degrees through open and distance learning. However, the full realization of NOUN's potential is hampered by limited digital resources, infrastructural gaps and security constraints within correctional facilities.

B. National Examinations: WAEC, NECO and JAMB

In addition to university education, inmates can sit for national secondary-level examinations such as West African Examinations Council (WAEC), National Examinations Council (NECO) and Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB) [Medium Security Custodial Centre (MSCC), Ikoyi, Lagos, Nigeria has a registered centre for the three examination bodies]. These qualifications enhance their ability to further their education or seek employment after incarceration. However, logistical issues, such as the absence of dedicated examination centres within custodial centres, funding constraints and access to adequate study materials, pose significant barriers to successful implementation.

IV. VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIAN CUSTODIAL CENTRES

Besides formal education, vocational training provides inmates with practical skills that enable them to pursue sustainable livelihoods upon release. Common training programmes include carpentry, welding,

tailoring, baking, shoemaking and crafts such as cap knitting and hand fan making. (The author designed and supervised the implementation of some of these vocational training programmes while serving at MSCC, Kirikiri, Lagos and MSCC Goron Dutse, Kano.) These vocational training programmes, however, face shortages of materials, a lack of qualified instructors and limited market access for products made by inmates.

V. SELECTION CRITERIA FOR INMATES IN REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES

In order to ensure the fairness, effectiveness and alignment with correctional (the 3 Rs—reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration) goals, a structured set of objective, security-based and rehabilitative criteria must be applied to the selection of inmates for rehabilitation programmes involving both educational and vocational training. This approach guarantees that resources are optimally utilized for those most likely to benefit and successfully reintegrate into society.

A. General Criteria Across All Programmes

Several important considerations apply to the selection process for both educational and vocational rehabilitation programmes. These are referred to as general criteria in the Nigerian correctional parlance and include:

- a) *Security Protocols*: The paramount concern is that the inmate poses no risk to the safety of staff or other inmates. An inmate must be classified as a low or medium security risk to be considered eligible. High security risk inmates such as violent extremist offenders (VEOs) are excluded;
- b) *Mental Health Evaluation*: A thorough mental health evaluation ensures that inmates are stable and mentally fit for structured activities, preventing disruptions and ensuring effective participation;
- c) *Inclusivity and Equity*: The selection process strives for fair representation across various demographic groups, including age, ethnic and regional backgrounds, promoting inclusivity and equitable access to rehabilitative opportunities. Owing to the fact that Nigeria is a multiethnic (371 groups; 525 languages) and multi-religious society, this balance is considered of great importance;
- d) *Institutional Goals*: The selection of programmes and participants must align with the overall rehabilitation plan of the Nigerian Correctional Service and its resource capacity. This is to ensure the sustainability and strategic direction of the programmes;
- e) *Post-Release Support Opportunities*: The availability of linkages to support programmes after release is considered. A number of NGOs partner with the NCoS in providing platforms for effective reintegration and follow-up in its aftercare programmes. This ensures that the skills and knowledge gained in the institution can be effectively utilized and sustained in the community, thereby maximizing the long-term impact of the rehabilitation effort.

B. Programme-Specific Criteria—Formal Education

The objective of formal education programmes within correctional facilities is to improve inmates' literacy, critical thinking, and ultimately, their future employability. Selection for these programmes is based on several key criteria. The vital ones that Nigerian correctional officers typically consider are:

- a) *Educational Background: Inmates*: This depends on the educational level the inmate is interested in. Generally, inmates are required to possess minimum educational qualifications for the programmes they intend to enrol in. Examples are bachelor's and master's degrees. However, for primary and secondary levels of education, priority is often given to inmates with an incomplete prior academic history, such as those who have not completed primary or secondary school. This is because our main targets are individuals who can gain the most foundational knowledge;
- b) *Cognitive Ability*: Basic literacy and numeracy skills are assessed via screening tests to ensure inmates possess the fundamental cognitive abilities required to participate in structured learning. For instance,

an inmate would typically need to demonstrate basic reading comprehension and arithmetic skills to benefit from the curriculum;

- c) *Sentence Length*: Inmates must have sufficient time remaining on their sentence to complete the programme or a defined stage thereof. For example, a programme designed for a 12-month duration would require an inmate to have at least 12 months remaining on their sentence. A minimum of six months remaining on the sentence is a general prerequisite for participation in any rehabilitation programme, as indicated in the screening checklist;
- d) *Behavioural Record*: A positive disciplinary history and consistent good conduct are essential. Inmates with a recent record of serious misconduct (e.g., within the last six months) would typically be excluded to maintain a conducive learning environment;
- e) *Rehabilitation Readiness*: Demonstrated commitment to self-improvement and prior participation in other rehabilitative activities indicate an inmate's readiness to engage in educational pursuits. This can be evidenced by their genuine interest in rehabilitation, as noted in the general eligibility criteria;
- f) *Age and Mental Fitness*: Selection is age-sensitive, and inmates must possess the mental capability to participate in structured learning. Medical and mental fitness evaluations are conducted to ensure an inmate can fully engage without undue strain or disruption.

C. Programme-Specific Criteria—Vocational Training

Vocational training programmes aim to equip inmates with practical, marketable skills for successful reintegration into the especially informal or private sector of the economy. The selection criteria for these programmes are as follows:

- a) *Security Classification*: These programmes typically require low- or medium-risk inmates who can be trusted with tools and equipment necessary for the training. A history of violence or misuse of tools would disqualify an inmate from programmes involving such equipment;
- b) *Employment Potential*: Priority is often given to inmates nearing their release date who have a high likelihood of securing employment or pursuing entrepreneurship post-release. This maximizes the immediate impact of the training;
- c) *Previous Experience or Interest*: Demonstrated interest or prior experience in a relevant trade is an advantage. For example, an inmate expressing keen interest in a specific craft or having some rudimentary experience in it would be considered favourably;
- d) *Teamwork and Conduct*: The ability to work cooperatively in group settings without posing risks to others is crucial, as many vocational training activities involve collaborative work. Stable and non-disruptive behaviour patterns are therefore essential;
- e) *Physical Fitness*: Certain vocational training, such as modern farming (crop/animal production), requires physical fitness for manual or technical work within the respective environments. Inmates must be physically able to undertake the demands of the training.

In summary, a conscientious screening process is a *sine qua non* for all rehabilitation programmes. Selection of inmates are often done utilizing a checklist. This checklist assesses general eligibility criteria and specific programme criteria (formal education, vocational training). For instance, an inmate must demonstrate a genuine interest in rehabilitation and have no recent record of serious misconduct (e.g., within the last six months) to pass the initial screening. These comprehensive criteria ensure that rehabilitation programmes are both impactful for the individual inmates and contribute effectively to broader correctional goals.

VI. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING DIGITAL LEARNING AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Despite their proven benefits, rehabilitation programmes in Nigerian custodial centres face multiple challenges, including:

- a) *Infrastructure Deficits:* Custodial centres lack reliable electricity, internet access and digital devices to support online learning;
- b) *Security Concerns:* Managing digital resources within custodial centres requires strict security protocols;
- c) *Funding Limitations:* Educational and vocational programmes suffer from irregular and insufficient funding;
- d) *Human Resource Gaps:* There is a shortage of trained educators and vocational trainers willing to work within correctional facilities.

VII. IMPACT ASSESSMENT: MEASURING REHABILITATION OUTCOMES

Studies have shown positive effects of educational and vocational programmes in correctional settings:

- a) *Reduced Recidivism:* Inmates who participate in structured rehabilitation programmes demonstrate lower likelihoods of reoffending;
- b) *Improved Self-Esteem and Motivation:* Engaging in education and vocational training fosters a sense of purpose and personal growth;
- c) *Enhanced Employment Prospects:* Academic qualifications and vocational skills significantly increase employability upon release.

VIII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the effectiveness of digital learning and vocational training, the following recommendations should be prioritized:

- a) *Infrastructure Development:* Invest in upgrading prison facilities to support digital learning through stable power supply and internet connectivity;
- b) *Security Protocols:* Establish clear guidelines for managing digital learning resources securely;
- c) *Sustainable Funding:* Secure consistent financial support from government allocations, NGOs and private-sector partnerships;
- d) *Staff Training and Capacity Building:* Train correctional educators and vocational trainers to effectively deliver rehabilitation programmes;
- e) *Monitoring and Evaluation:* Implement regular impact assessments to ensure rehabilitation programmes achieve desired outcomes.

IX. CONCLUSION

Digital learning and vocational training represent transformative tools for the rehabilitation of inmates in Nigerian custodial centres. When aligned with established correctional models such as GLM and RNR, and supported by adequate infrastructure and policy consistency, these interventions can significantly reduce recidivism and contribute to public safety. A renewed commitment to evidence-based rehabilitation strategies will not only uphold the rights and dignity of inmates but also promote a more inclusive and secure society.

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