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## Narratives of Hope in Hopelessness: Reasons for Pursuing ODL-Mediated Higher Education among Females Serving Life Sentences in South African Correctional Centres

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**Abstract.** In South Africa, correctional education research overwhelmingly focuses on male students lived experiences. Consequently, any nuanced efforts aimed at reformation, especially of incarcerated female students sentenced to life imprisonment, remain undervalued and insufficiently understood by policymakers, correctional bureaucracy, and the general public. This qualitative multiple case study situated within the social constructivist paradigm, was conducted in two correctional centres in two provinces of South Africa. It aimed to gain insight into the experiences of incarcerated female students who are serving life sentences and studying through open distance learning (ODL). Eight incarcerated female students participated in the study via focus group interviews. Grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights framework, the thematically curated findings encapsulate the hegemony in the prison education system, and the complex relationship between incarceration and education. The findings revealed that the participants regard ODL-mediated higher education as a rare and much-needed “second chance-at-life opportunity” to reconstruct lost childhood dreams and find meaning through academic pursuits, which also serves as a coping mechanism that restores hope and opportunity for their reformation in times of distress imposed by the prison environment. Barriers included the unbecoming behaviour of officials and restricted access to learning facilities, particularly libraries and learning centres. The findings outlined an urgent need for a review of student support policy in the studied correctional centres. Having a sound student support policy is poised to ensure that student support programmes are based on procedural fairness and the implementation of carceral education is insulated from discriminatory practices.

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## 1. Introduction

Advocacy for compulsory education in South African correctional centres represents a proactive approach to dealing with recidivism and illiteracy. Education is a basic human right that the constitution (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996) protects unreservedly. Every constitution envisages that education should occur without leaving anyone behind. The United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-development>) emphasises the imperative for education to be accessible to marginalised demographics.

In the correctional context, this right accentuates an imperative for incarcerated persons to be granted continuous access to quality education, from the first to the last day of their incarceration term (Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). To heed this call, governments have made noticeable efforts to upscale the provision of “education to prisoners in the belief that after they are released, they would be able to return to society and leave the life of crime” (Moore, 2016, p. 1).

Moreover, Section 9(9) of the White Paper on Corrections underscores that the structure of the South African correctional education system must resemble that of the national education system, ensuring that incarcerated persons access basic education on an equal footing with any other citizen (Makalela, 2023). With a significant inmate population of 156,000 nationwide (Erasmus, 2025), the White Paper on Corrections has been instrumental in institutionalising reforms to reduce illiteracy rates among offenders, providing them with a new lease of life.

Currently, South African correctional centres provide a variety of educational programmes to meet the diverse educational needs of incarcerated individuals. A large chunk of them follows the curriculum as prescribed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to acquire a Grade 12 certificate (Department of Correctional Services [DCS], 2024). According to DCS, the pass rate among students in the Grade 12 learning stream was 96% in 2024 (Lee, 2025), highlighting the importance of upscaling it to ensure that no inmate is left behind. In addition, DCS has entered into partnerships with various post-school educational institutions to introduce vocational training programmes and formal academic qualifications. Vocational programmes are offered in cooperation and in line with national and provincial departments of education, and the DCS is bound by the directives and curricula of these departments.

Generally, free secondary and vocational education, up to and including N1-N3 (business studies), is provided to all sentenced juveniles, while adult students are accommodated only when resources permit or they commit to financing their education (DCS, 2024). Meanwhile, formal higher education programmes are offered through distance education (Mdakane et al., 2024) and funded by students, their sponsors, or family members. The tapestry of such qualifications embodies diplomas, occupational certificates, first degrees, higher diplomas,

professional qualifications, higher degrees, further research degrees and doctorates (DCS, 2024). Education within correctional facilities serves a dual purpose, the first of which is to support rehabilitation and social reintegration efforts, thus offering incarcerated individuals an opportunity to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society, post-release (Meek, 2019). Second, it acts as a critical coping mechanism, providing incarcerated students with a mental escape and sense of purpose in an otherwise restrictive environment (Johnson & Quan-Baffour, 2022) in which they “are told what to wear and eat, what time to eat, wake up and sleep, when to participate in recreation, when they can make phone calls and to whom, when family and friends can visit, and what they can receive in [the] mail” (Moore, 2016, p. 2). Vandala (2019) found that correctional education enhances offenders’ self-esteem and resilience, helping them overcome the trauma of incarceration and look forward to rejoining society after their release.

Also, White et al. (2025) concluded that correctional education cultivates students’ positive mindset and improves their coping mechanisms during incarceration. These accounts suggest that education has a therapeutic effect on incarcerated females and helps to restore their sanity amid trying times. As Davis (2021) points out, incarcerated individuals often rely on education to combat isolation and hopelessness, as it provides a constructive outlet for their energy and creativity.

Since prison education occurs in a secluded space and under a unique institutional climate (Behan, 2021), its success is contingent on the nature of student support systems and security considerations (Davis et al., 2014). A balancing act is thus crucial for sustaining the quality of learner support, albeit without fracturing the integrity of security processes. From a theoretical point of departure, the art of taking care of educational and security concerns on an equal footing is consistent with Noddings’ (2015) “*principle of practice*”, which underscores the need for consistency and attentiveness in creating supportive learning environments even under adverse social conditions. Care ethics is an approach to moral philosophy that capitalises on relationships between correctional officers and offenders (Dominey & Canton, 2022).

It emphasises the importance of forging a trusting and respectful relationship between officials and inmates to ensure that both parties enjoy mutual respect and responsibility in maintaining common ground in their daily encounters. However, for incarcerated students to feel cared for, it is correctional educators who have to showcase their willingness to be of service to them by conducting themselves professionally (Whitehead, 2013). Essentially, the theory explains Noddings’ understanding that in any educational setting, a supportive and safe learning environment is a precondition for enabling student success and engendering a sense of belonging, while also cultivating students’ self-regulated agency and promoting both their academic development and personal growth.

The discussion unfolding in the study reported on here, explores the deployment of ODL-mediated higher education from the vantage point of social equity and women’s empowerment in carceral systems. Parry (2024a) noted that women often struggle to have their right to education recognised by correctional officials.

Mdakane et al. (2022) established that incarcerated females studying through distance learning do not acquire comprehensive student support due to patriarchal tendencies within the South African carceral education system. *“In the larger picture of education for incarcerated people, one element remains clear – women continue to experience disparities in educational equity”* (Dean, 2020, n.p.), yet not many researchers are committed to addressing this lacuna by lending an ear to incarcerated female students (Mdakane et al., 2024), particularly those serving life sentences and pursuing formal higher education through an ODL mode in South African correctional centres. According to Vince and Evison (2021), the absence of their voice in research is compounded by the fact that there are generally fewer women serving longer prison sentences (p. 1), particularly those who are actively pursuing higher education.

The lack of participation of women serving long prison sentences in research points to the need for documenting their lived experiences (Vince & Evison, 2021). Therefore, in the context of this study, the participants (i.e., females pursuing ODL-mediated higher education while serving life sentences in the South African carceral system) fell into the category of “hard-to-reach research populations” (Shaghghi et al., 2011, p. 86) whose lived experiences are seldom documented in prison education research. The inquiry was framed around the following research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** What motivates incarcerated female students to pursue ODL-mediated higher education while serving a life sentence?

**RQ2:** What challenges do incarcerate female students serving life sentences experience, whilst studying through ODL?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Social Issues Influencing Women’s Access to Education in the Developing World**

Since education is a human rights issue, it is crucial for South African correctional centres to ensure that the implementation of educational programmes occurs in a socially just manner, by adopting a gender-balanced approach that equally responds to the career and future growth trajectories of both men and women. In almost all countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), research indicates that women are more ambitious than men when it comes to participation in higher education than at the senior secondary level (OECD, 2021). Women often pursue education for various reasons, with many viewings it as an opportunity to revive aspirations they were unable to achieve prior to their incarceration.

Education is viewed as a beacon of hope and the only pathway to a better life. It capacitates *“women with the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence to participate in society, exercise their rights, and improve their lives”* (Reshi et al., 2022, p. 446). According to the OECD (2021), women with a tertiary qualification, who are between the ages of 25 and 34, earn 52 per cent more than those with an upper secondary education. To most women, education is an avenue to dismantle

centuries of patriarchy and social deprivation and demonstrate their innate ability to live and perform in alignment with their highest self as human beings who are just as capable as men. The prevalence of systemic, cultural and societal barriers to accessing education across the developing world (Reshi et al., 2022), however, implies that women's educational pursuits are often shaped by complex life experiences, including disrupted childhoods, economic hardships and societal marginalisation (Kajawo & Johnson, 2024).

According to Turner (2018), girls are also at a disadvantage in attaining quality education because of the patriarchal nature of South African society. Other barriers to accessing and completing education stem from their families' socioeconomic status, existing cultural stereotypes, and systemic or structural factors (Naik, 2023; Parry, 2023b). Their plight is worsened by the scourge of poverty, which is known for leaving many households surviving on incomes below the minimum wage, thus relegating women to the receiving end of social marginalisation. When poverty hits home, young women are compelled to abandon their active participation in education, to explore various means of contributing financially to their households or to assume caregiving responsibilities (Parry, 2023b).

Turner (2018) found that patriarchy has caused many South African women to occupy a lower social status than men and socialised to work in the home and be mothers. Indications are that this situation is not confined to the South African social context, but also infiltrates other global social contexts, particularly in developing countries. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco, 2015) reports that globally, more than half of the children not enrolled in school are girls. This is further evidenced in recent statistics indicating that about 122 million girls from lower socio-economic brackets are out of school globally (United Nations Children's Fund [Unicef], 2025).

In Southeast Asia alone, adolescent girls aged 15–19 are reportedly three times more likely than boys to drop out of school, linger in unemployment, or have no training with which to enter the labour market (Unicef, 2025). For example, most families in India still divert their educational investments to a boy child rather than to a girl child (Deininger et al., 2013). Similarly, the African girl child's educational journey remains murky, while her fight for even the smallest share of economic emancipation and social equality is even harder to win. Moreover, in its recent report, Unesco (2024) highlights that, across sub-Saharan Africa, nine million girls aged six to 11 are out of school, compared to six million boys. This effectively makes young women's educational dream a sacrificial lamb at the altar of patriarchy.

Unesco (2024) cautions that the continuance of low girl-child participation in education will likely result in economic losses to sub-Saharan Africa's GDP, amounting to \$210 billion. The Unesco report rationalises why the deprivation of educational opportunities or the lack of support structures for women is estimated at two-thirds of the world's illiterate adult population, which in numerical figures translates to 496 million women (Ford, 2015). These findings,

combined, point to the prevalence of deeply ingrained gender inequalities in societies across the vast geographical landscapes of the developing world. Thus, patriarchal structures place additional burdens on women, resulting in them being primarily responsible for domestic duties, including childcare and household management, and unable to pursue education or employment (Unesco, 2015) Additionally, patriarchal norms dictate gender roles where women are expected to be submissive, caregivers and voiceless, leading some to internalise this subjugation (Turner, 2018). Unfortunately, many of the factors that constrain women's pursuit of education in broader societal institutions are also prevalent in correctional centres, compelling women to fight hard to keep their dreams of an education alive, as discussed below.

## **2.2 The Odds against Women Pursuing Post-School Education within the Carceral System**

Dean (2020) states that, as in any mainstream society, women in prison are not immune to facing hurdles that make achieving education a challenging pursuit. Illiteracy, patriarchal systems, and joblessness are some of the hurdles that dent women's attempts to redefine their identities beyond incarceration and work towards breaking cycles of poverty or criminal behaviour (Agboola et al., 2022).

Most of the hurdles incarcerated female students experience while pursuing an education are induced by the uncaring carceral systems under which they serve prison sentences, and these obstacles occur despite their human rights being clearly stipulated in international legislative frameworks. The Kampala Declaration on Prison Conditions in Africa, [s. 7], stresses that "*prisoners should be given access to education and skills training in order to make it easier for them to reintegrate into society after their release*" (Penal Reform International [PRI], 1996, n.p.).

This legislation alludes to the need for social structures and systems in African societies at large to be reconditioned to embed social equity. In this regard, social equity mirrors a gender perspective whose premium is on having incarcerated men and women benefit equally from prison education opportunities. However, full realisation of gender equality in the implementation of prison education is yet to be achieved. The Gender, Health and Justice Research Unit (GHJRU, 2012) reported that incarcerated women in South Africa expressed a strong desire for equitable access to education, especially considering that a large proportion of educational and skills development opportunities tend to be earmarked for men. In the same study, it emerged that females serving longer sentences have limited access to education, training and development opportunities (GHJRU, 2012).

Ideally, access to further education and training opportunities must be made available to both female and male incarcerated students, as stipulated in the White Paper on Corrections. To that end, the current state of affairs demonstrates Thompson's (2020) consideration of correctional centres as "*microcosms of their broader societies*" (para. 31) and extends a postulation that prison education systems are equally affected by socially and culturally engineered negativity towards the female empowerment agenda. According to DCS, in 2023 there were 4 053 female prisoners in South Africa's correctional centres (Naik, 2023), yet only

a few had access to higher education opportunities, when compared to their male counterparts (Abamu, 2024).

To create a false picture of the equal distribution of educational opportunities, incarcerated women are channelled to pursue rudimentary vocational training, particularly needlework, caregiving, cooking, as well as bread and flour confectionery baking courses, and culinary arts as well as secretarial courses, most of which are informal, non-credit bearing and non-accredited (Allen, 2023; Naik, 2023). By contrast, males have access to an array of formally structured and mainly accredited skills programmes to choose from (Allen, 2023). This fortifies the notion that gender norms are institutionally re-produced such that incarcerated female students continue to experience disparities in educational equity.

According to Parry (2023a, p. 9), prison education programmes are predominantly male-centric and do not take gender-appropriate needs into account, with the consequence that “women [become] a vulnerable gendered minority of an already relegated community” and leave them undereducated and unprepared for release. Not only does the inequitable access to education limit women’s educational attainment, but it also perpetuates cycles of inequality, rendering them ineligible for gainful employment and susceptible to crime, exploitation, and a lack of upward mobility (Mdakane et al., 2024).

Similarly, a study by Quiroga-Carrillo et al. (2024) showed that incarcerated female students in the Spanish prison education system were affected by discrimination related to socio-educational intervention and to the adaptation of correctional centres to their unique needs. These environmental barriers mean that they must deal with a prison education system that fails to provide adequate student and academic support.

### **2.3 Understanding Barriers to Quality Education in a South African Carceral Context**

Numerous studies (Mahlangu, 2024a, 2025; Rosmilawati & Suherman, 2018) attest to the positive aspects of pursuing education whilst serving a prison sentence. Similarly, there are other empirical perspectives concerning barriers to the effective implementation of prison education programmes. Some of the notable obstacles are discussed below.

#### *2.3.1 Living Conditions*

Learning behind bars is not for everyone. It requires a person to wear a thickly layered “coping coat”. With prisons being complex learning ecosystems there are bound to be challenges that, when not tackled head-on, can result in those education systems being unable to live up to expectations. As such, the implementation of prison education programmes is confronted by systemic barriers and institutional challenges that compromise their effectiveness (Miselo & Mutereko, 2019). Living conditions are often undesirable for one’s mental health: the “*dehumanising conditions in prison worsen mental health problems and make prisoners more prone to aggression*” (Quandt & Jones, 2021, para. 1).

Consequently, women's correctional centres have become synonymous with a high prevalence of distress, and incidents of risky behaviour and self-inflicted harm. Those who are overwhelmed resort to extreme measures; for example, research in the USA shows that "between 2013 and 2023, rates of self-harm in women's jails rose from 1,545 to 5,624 per 1,000 prisoners" (Taylor, 2025, p. 3). As Czerniawski (2015) notes, prison education systems in the United Kingdom often reflect societal inequalities, with students from marginalised backgrounds facing greater challenges in accessing resources and support. Eikeland (2009) found that, in Nordic countries, incarcerated students frequently reported feelings of exclusion and disempowerment, despite the presence of well-structured educational programmes. Research conducted by the Singapore Prison Service cites anxiety and depression as the most common conditions among inmates (Wham, 2022).

### *2.3.2 Access to Academic Facilities, Security Protocols, and the Attitude of Prison Officials*

Correctional centres are severely under-resourced and overcrowded, which means the ratio between offenders and officials presents challenges to the latter. The Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (Popcru) has demanded the deployment of more officers in South Africa's prisons, in the face of overcrowding and short staffing. As Popcru points out, the staff complement that stood at 40 000 in 2009 and at 38 000 in 2016, with only 27 000 officials working at the coalface of correctional centres (Protection Web, 2024).

According to the latest Estimates of National Expenditure, DCS staff numbers will be reduced from 39 599 in 2024/25 to 39 204 in 2025/26, and to 38 882 in 2026/27 (Mabuza, 2025). This provides a glimpse into the insufficiency of educators in the South African prison education system to cope with the needs of students comprehensively, a factor which, in some instances, forces DCS to assign teaching and student support duties to employees who do not possess a teaching qualification (South African Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

For those pursuing formal education, these factors make it twice as hard to enjoy a student-friendly learning climate and academic support structure (Quandt & Jones, 2021). Mdakane et al. (2024) describe how incarcerated students frequently encounter a lack of support, as the prison system prioritises security and control over educational access. The tension between security measures and educational practices within correctional facilities presents a significant challenge for prison education programmes. While security is a fundamental aspect of prison operations, its rigid enforcement often disrupts educational activities, limiting their effectiveness (Behan, 2014). This tension is particularly evident in contexts where educational access is subordinated to security protocols. Moreover, developing countries' correctional systems are vulnerable to overcrowding, understaffing, inadequate infrastructure, and conflict between security and education (Behan, 2014).

ODL as a mode of education came into being amid the growing need to embed social equity and non-discriminatory empowerment in modern societies, by expanding access to higher education to people who would otherwise not be able to follow contact learning, for various reasons. In carceral systems, ODL is

considered the most viable mode of acquiring formal under- and postgraduate education (Parry, 2024b) and is contingent on having regular access to a computer and the internet, to attend tutorials. Mahlangu (2024b) concurs that various digital tools are necessary for any carceral education system, as they enable access to ODL courseware, and collaborative learning and knowledge sharing. Despite this, there is a perpetual tendency to deny incarcerated ODL students access to digital tools and infrastructure (Mdakane et al., 2022; Mdakane et al., 2024).

The rigidity of security processes towards incarcerated students has seen them seeking litigation for what they believe is an unconstitutional restriction on learning. For example, on 14 November 2024, the Constitutional Court heard a case filed against the then Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development and two other parties, against a Supreme Court of Appeal judgement granting the client the right to use a personal computer in the prison cell without an internet connection, to further his studies (Lawyers for Human Rights [LHR], 2024).

Personal computer and internet connectivity are compulsory for students, particularly those pursuing studies through ODL. Such a drastic step by the aforementioned student is indicative of the learning environment in most correctional institutions which, according to Macauley (2022), is dire to the point that

*“inmates must study in the cells they share with other prisoners, where television and radio are often on continuously, and noise from adjacent cells, the prison yard and loudspeakers is incessant. Inside the cells, desks must be shared and there is often a lack of equipment such as notebooks and pens”* (para. 7)

The narrative above illustrates that in the developing world, only a few prison education systems are truly effective. Miselo and Mutereko (2019) argue that in South Africa, prison authorities often do not fully grasp the severity of the learning conditions and challenges faced within correctional facilities. This lack of understanding highlights their failure to ensure that officials adhere to relevant policies when addressing the needs of incarcerated students. Ahmed et al. (2019) observed that in the prison education systems of developing countries, while some prison officials are genuinely passionate about rendering effective educational support, the majority tend to be incompetent in their roles and are primarily focused on earning a paycheck.

This explains the ongoing sentiment that prison authorities do not have the willpower to correctly channel available resources towards improving the quality of prison education programmes and cultivate *ethics of care* among prison education officials, which in the context of South Africa’s public service system are propounded by the *Batho Pele* (i.e., “people first”) principles.

Kakupa and Mulenga (2021, p. 2) characterise effective prison education systems as those that have officials who accommodate *“inmates’ different socio-cultural realities and learning needs and employ participatory methods which effectively place the individual at the centre of their learning”*. In the context of South African society, such a conduct by prison officials resembles that of the *Batho Pele* principles, which

bind all public sector employees, regardless of their professional seniority or social status, to treat citizens (including inmates or offenders) with the utmost humility and *ubuntu* [i.e., humanity] (Nkambule, 2020, 2022, 2023a, Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023, Romm & Nkambule, 2022, 2024).

Subordinate prison officials are just a small part of the larger issues that affect most prison education systems, whose top-down hierarchies suppress subordinate employees' voices, resulting in them often being punished for both their own unprofessional conduct and that of their superiors. In defence of the subordinate prison officials (teachers), Bhatti (2010) argues that, just like inmates, those officials feel undervalued and are not considered when decisions are taken which directly affect their involvement in prison education.

By implication of feeling "*different and excluded*" (Bhatti, 2010, p. 32), these subordinate officials' non-committal attitudes point to the prevalence of what Foucault (2019) refers to as the "concept of disciplinary power", which is denoted by institutional practices that often reinforce dominance and subordination, limiting the agency of the individuals within these systems. This view is supported by studies which show that, in some public education institutions in South Africa, senior officials tend to exert their "aura of authority" and "harsh power" to water down the implementation of socially just education policy directives and suppress the voices of key stakeholders (i.e., incarcerated students and subordinate prison officials) (see Nkambule, 2023b, p. 78; Zulu, 2012, p. 1).

In a way, such narratives reflect the broader challenges confronting incarcerated students worldwide and underline the need for more care-centred approaches (towards implementing prison education programmes), in line with Noddings' (2015) framework of care ethics. Simply put, poor work relations among prison staff, incompetent officials, teacher shortages, inadequate learning facilities, and underfunding are evident challenges that have an impact on the quality of education programmes in prisons (Macauley, 2022). Yet, as Mahlangu (2024b) notes, despite the undesirability of the learning climate they are subjected to, incarcerated ODL students apply themselves with tenacity to not let anything sway them from the goal of completing their studies.

#### **2.4 Theoretical Framework Underpinning the Study**

Theoretically, the study was undergirded by Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) (UN, 1948) – a legislative framework containing a series of themed guidelines for governments to operate as agents for social reform and support structures for their citizenries, ensuring that no one is left behind. This framework views education as a fundamental right whose attainment (or lack thereof) is influenced by a multiplicity of factors, including socioeconomic status, and the political and legislative environments under which people are governed (Prasetia et al., 2025).

As such, the framework advocates for the inclusive participation of all citizens in education, making it unconstitutional and unethical to act contrary to its precepts. Moreover, Article 26 states that "*everyone has the right to education, which shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening*

of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (UN, 1948). In this quote, *everyone* also encapsulates incarcerated persons, because this legislative framework deems education to be a viable tool for "*developing their human personality and thus restoring their sense of dignity*" (Behan, 2021, p. 34). In the context of prison education, the framework helped the researchers to conceptualise the idealism with which prison officials whose fiduciary duties intersect with education and resource provisioning ought to, at all times, act within the realm of social equity and procedural fairness. The framework is particularly apt for this study, as it curates the narrative that social equity and procedural fairness require (prison officials as) policy implementors to adhere to the prescripts of policies without contravention (Behan, 2021), to ensure that education as a social reform is rolled out effectively and inclusively to benefit men and women equally.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Research Design and Approach

Curated in a multiple-case-study design, this qualitative inquiry was embedded in the interpretive paradigm. A multiple case study design was chosen because it involves an in-depth analysis of how a research problem interfaces with multiple research contexts. In contrast to a single case study, which examines the research problem within one correctional centre, a multiple case study has a broader scope. This approach allows for a better understanding of how widespread the research problem may be beyond just one specific correctional facility. As Baxter and Jack (2008) note, this approach is likely to yield more reliable results. It enabled researchers to compare and contrast cases effectively, yielding rich and multidimensional insights (Williams, 2025).

Hunziker and Blankenagel (2021) stipulate that a multiple case study research design avoids the researcher(s) having to study a particular phenomenon in isolation, to arrive at an understanding of the patterns of its effects on human subjects in multiple social research contexts. Dobson (1999, p. 259) notes that "*the intention of case study research is generally to gain an 'in-depth' understanding of the concerned phenomena in a 'real-life' setting*". Therefore, by using a case study, the researchers were positioned to investigate the research problem, to generate a sense of how it affects the research actors (in the context of the study, incarcerated females studying via ODL while serving life sentences) and to interpret their narratives – this, to draw out parallels and dissimilarities between them, and table the findings that are informed by the objectives of the study.

#### 3.2 Participant Selection

The investigation focused on the narratives of eight participants in two South African maximum security correctional centres. The two centres were selected because they were the largest maximum-security female correctional facilities in South Africa that hosted Unisa-DCS hubs and incarcerated Unisa students serving life sentences. This selection aimed to broaden the potential participant pool. In each centre, two participants were selected through purposive sampling, while the remaining participants were chosen using snowball sampling techniques. The selection criteria for purposive sampling involved choosing only female

participants who were pursuing higher education through ODL and were serving life imprisonment.

The rationale for combining purposive and snowball sampling in this study was that incarcerated female students serving life sentences and enrolled in ODL institutions of higher education were typically very scarce. Snowball sampling is important because it involves identifying participants who meet the study criteria, and asking them to refer others with similar traits or experiences (Hassan, 2024). It is often employed in exploratory research where traditional sampling methods are impractical due to difficulties in accessing the target population (Hassan, 2024). While useful for facilitating access to hard-to-reach populations, snowball sampling naturally heightens the risk of over-representation of certain traits or behaviours due to its reliance on participant referrals (Naderifar et al., 2017); therefore, to reduce bias, the researchers only requested the purposively sampled participants to refer them to participants sharing the same traits with them on the day of the interviews, rather than asking them well in advance.

Within that premise, the researchers purposively selected participants they knew could provide access to more participants who shared similar traits (i.e., were also pursuing ODL-mediated higher education while serving life sentences). The following table contains the demographical data of the study participants.

**Table 1. Demographic Information of Focus Group Participants**

Participant #	Correctional facility	Qualification	Race	No years in prison
Participant 1	A	B.Com (Statistics) (Quantitative Management)	White	8
Participant 2	A	BA (Psychology)	White	9
Participant 3	A	B.Com (Life Sciences)	Black	3
Participant 4	A	B.Com (Law)	Black	11
Participant 5	B	Masters in Human Resource Management	Black	10
Participant 6	B	BA (Information Science)	White	21
Participant 7	B	B.Ed	Indian	8
Participant 8	B	BA (Counselling Psychology)	Black	9

As tabulated above, the study revolved around eight participants, namely females studying via ODL while serving a life sentence in two correctional centres. Researchers deemed the number of participants as having sufficiently contributed their perspectives to a point of saturation. All the questions included in the interview guide were addressed by the participants during their focus group interview sessions and the member checking phase of the research. By having an

interview guide with a diverse set of questions, the researchers were able to gather detailed and descriptive accounts from participants in various research settings.

Moreover, utilising focus group interviews for data collection and member checking to validate the perspectives of participants enhanced the research rigour, achieved data saturation, and improved the transferability of the findings, despite the smaller sample size (Williams et al., 2024).

### **3.3 Data Collection**

To gain access to the correctional centres and, by extension, the study population, the researchers followed the protocol outlined by DCS' Research Ethics Committee (REC). In accordance with this protocol, an internal gatekeeper - which in this case was the centre's Head of Education - was assigned to facilitate access. The researchers liaised with the Head of Education to identify and recruit participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. Following the distribution of the study invitation, participant information sheet, and ethical clearance, formal permission was granted to access the site and conduct the research. Data were collected in the correctional centres, using focus group interviews which lasted between 50 and 75 minutes each.

The use of focus group discussions in social research is endorsed by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009), who consider such interviews a helpful tool for exploring the lived experiences of individuals within a group context, where the dynamic interaction between them contributes multidimensional insights into the research problem. An interview protocol was used to keep the focus group discussions aligned with the primary research questions. The interview data were later transcribed and saved on a computer as a Microsoft Word document.

Lincoln and Guba (2016) encourage researchers to consider elements of trustworthiness in their research. These are the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). To achieve credibility, the researchers gathered data from different participants in two focus group settings. To that end, "all interviews were recorded, allowing the participants to cross-check, validate, and confirm information at any time" (Ditlhale & van den Berg, 2024, p. 597).

Additionally, the transferability was achieved through collecting thick descriptions of participants' perspectives, mainly by asking probing questions. Confirmability was achieved by utilising member checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of their inferences (Ahmed, 2024), while dependability was ensured through data triangulation and keeping an audit trail. Collectively, these measures were employed to ensure trustworthiness in this qualitative research study.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim from the semi-structured focus group interviews (Creswell, 2009). Thematic analysis was used to process the collected data, which were developed, arranged and organised into codes, categories, themes and sub-themes, in order to provide full descriptions of the

participants' experiences. Therefore, as observed by Braun et al. (2019, p. 845), it ensured that the researchers were directly responsible for "*interpreting data through the lens of their own cultural membership and social positionings, their theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge*". This method involved the iterative process of reading through the transcribed interviews with the aim of organising the data into a manageable format of thick descriptions, common words and phrases, and recurring patterns of information (Braun & Clarke, 2017). After reading through the transcripts, coding ensued, which in essence involved identifying sentences or phrases that represented a particular perspective that resonated with the study. The third stage dealt with using the codes as a topical guideline to examine descriptions and significant statements pertaining to the participants' experiences and identifying preliminary themes.

After further synthesis, which entailed comparing these with the research questions, the provisional themes were modified and adopted as final themes, resulting in the completion of the fourth stage. Subsequently, excerpts were selected carefully to clarify the themes by removing incoherent information and offering an interpretation of the themes and excerpts (Kvale, 1996). In the reporting of the findings, the excerpts that were quoted alongside the narrative interpretation of the themes demonstrated the credibility and trustworthiness of the identified themes and the conclusions drawn (Elo et al., 2014).

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

The study was vetted by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of South Africa (Reference number: 90230337\_CREC\_CHS\_2020) and the Department of Correctional Services Research Ethics Committee (DCS-REC), and declared ethically sound. Before the researchers commenced interviewing the participants, the latter were oriented on the objectives of the research and their expected contribution to it. The researchers were cognisant of the need to respect the rule of anonymity, hence, instead of using the participants' real names, they were referred to by their order of participation (i.e., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.).

According to Kaaristo (2022), researchers need to be mindful of their appearance and approachability, both of which can influence the power dynamics in a research study involving marginalised research populations. As such, during the focus group sessions, the researchers wore simple clothes, accommodated the use of different languages, and constantly exhibited humour and relatability. This eliminated potential power imbalances and facilitated the development of a rapport between the researchers and the participants (Kaaristo, 2022).

Additionally, informed consent outlining participants' rights and the parameters of their involvement in the study was provided, and they agreed by signing it. Also, before commencement of the focus group discussions, they were reminded about their right to express themselves whenever they felt violated or to rescind their participation in the study if they so wished.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The interview data were analysed using a thematic analysis technique propounded by Braun and Clarke (2014). Ultimately, two primary and three subsidiary themes were adopted to respond to the research questions.

**RQ1: What motivates incarcerated female students to pursue higher education while serving a life sentence?**

### 4.1 Motivation to Pursue Higher Education via ODL

The psychological and physical strain associated with imprisonment makes offenders see prisons as “graves for the living” (Euro-Med Monitor, 2020, cited in Blend, 2025). Those who are serving longer sentences endure that stress for much longer. Amid such challenges, those who positively applied themselves characterised their reasons for pursuing higher education as discussed under the following two subthemes.

#### Subtheme 1: Reconstructs Childhood Dreams

Education fosters a sense of accomplishment and agency, encouraging these women to participate more fully in social and economic life, and preparing them for their successful reintegration into society (Fourie & Koen, 2018; Ryder, 2020). The confidence and skills gained through education equip them to consider the likelihood of a *future* beyond prison walls. The participants deemed distance higher education a rare and much-needed second chance at life, and an opportunity to seek redemption and undo their past mistakes of not wholly applying themselves to their education.

They expressed how, for various reasons, they had given up on their childhood career dreams but could now reconstruct those. The extracts below indicated that prison provided the participating women with the time and opportunity to focus on their education – something they may not have had on the outside, as a result of their unfavourable lifestyle choices and personal circumstances. Participant 3 saw education as a “second chance-at-life opportunity” to acquire a qualification, self-correct and dream again:

*“I was 18 when I got arrested and I had big dreams of becoming a doctor one day [but] obviously [chuckles], that didn’t happen. I got sentenced for different charges and here I am trying to make the best out of the situation.”* [Participant 3]

Participant 7 embarked on ODL to upgrade her degree to a postgraduate education and enjoy the benefits of lifelong learning, adding:

*“I’ve been in the legal profession for over 24 years now and I always wanted to further my studies and do my master’s and PhD... but I was convicted for this thing, so I felt I would rather... I mean, once I was outside and never had the opportunity to further my studies, you know? Now that I am in prison, I have that opportunity because I have the time.”* [Participant 7]

Participant 8 stated that her motivation to study further was based on her desire to become literate and go on to achieve a higher education qualification, to restore her childhood dream of becoming a graduate someday. She noted:

*"I got incarcerated at a very young age, just straight after high school, and I still wanted to pursue my studies. So, for me, studying is a dream come true."* [Participant 8]

The participants' narratives highlight two important factors: the paradoxical nature of incarceration and the transformative role of education. Their accounts reflect a deep, long-standing desire for education that predates their incarceration, indicating that, despite its many constraints, prison can offer a structured environment that serves as a catalyst for self-reflection, personal growth, and the pursuit of deferred goals.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that correctional education extends beyond the attainment of literacy or formal qualifications; it also serves as an impetus for identity reconstruction, particularly among women serving life sentences. The notion projected by the participants – that education allows incarcerated individuals to reconnect with, and reconstruct, childhood dreams – is supported by previous literature. Parry (2024b) conducted an exploratory study involving a purposive sample of seven participants, selected from 14 students pursuing tertiary education at a correctional facility in South Africa.

All participants, aged between 32 and 58 years, reported having had limited access to, and minimal opportunities for, higher education prior to their incarceration. The narratives of the women collectively reinforced the notion that imprisonment can serve as a catalyst for pursuing educational advancement. Warner (2007) asserts that education in prison can serve as a lifeline for individuals seeking to redefine themselves. Meanwhile, Meek and Lewis (2013) emphasise that educational programmes offered in prisons can provide a transformative opportunity for individuals to reclaim a sense of purpose and envision new futures.

Similarly, Nally et al. (2012) argue that access to education fosters personal development, builds self-worth, and contributes to a more positive self-identity. Such narratives resonate globally, as researchers have highlighted the rehabilitative potential of education in diverse correctional contexts. For example, studies from the United States of America and the United Kingdom reveal that individuals who engage in prison education are less likely to reoffend, as education fosters a sense of agency and hope in them (Davis et al., 2014).

### **Subtheme 2: A Coping Mechanism**

The Kampala Declaration on Prison Conditions in Africa (PRI, 1996), categorically states that Africa's correctional centres not only grapple with severe overcrowding and inadequate resources, but have also become inhuman to live in. This legislative document advocates for the creation of a prison learning environment that cultivates student success and equitable access to education for all, because it recognises the value of education in the lives of incarcerated persons. Beyond academic achievement, prison education fosters emotional healing, self-discovery and transformation (Flynn & Higdon, 2022).

This transformative process contributes to their emotional recovery and personal growth, helping them navigate the challenges of incarceration with resilience (Potelwa & Adu, 2020). In the same vein, the participants in this study reported perceiving education as a lifeline and a refuge that restores their sanity and emotional wellbeing in the face of physically and psychologically draining situations. One participant appreciated that not only does studying via ODL capacitate her with academic knowledge, it also enables her to pass the time and worry less about what happens within the prison environment. She explained:

*"I study because it keeps me busy; sitting in this place and not studying will drive me mad...."* [Participant 5]

Another deemed education an activity that insulates her headspace from stressful living conditions:

*"Staying in the [prison] section is going to kill me. It will be the end of me because not studying means sitting in the section doing nothing and that makes me think too much. It stresses me, so to avoid that I keep myself busy."* [Participant 2]

Participant 4 commended education for its therapeutic effect on her mental health and making her productive by giving her a sense of purpose and something to look forward to when she wakes up every day:

*"To keep your sanity in prison, you need to keep your mind working. I study just to keep myself busy, because I do not want to see myself sleeping the whole day."* [Participant 4]

To remain psychologically intact, and achieve a healthy adjustment to the prison environment, prisoners were required to participate in higher education. Participant 6 concluded that education makes coping with the turbulence of living behind bars more bearable, adding:

*"I have been in this prison for 21 years now. The only thing that makes me cope is to study. [Otherwise] I would have never made it."* [Participant 6]

These narratives are consistent with findings from the literature, which highlight the therapeutic value of education in correctional settings. According to Czerniawski (2015), education provides structure and meaning, helping incarcerated individuals maintain their mental health and resilience. Similarly, Davis et al. (2014) found participation in educational programmes to be associated with improved psychological wellbeing, and with fostering a sense of achievement and self-worth. Sharew et al. (2024) found that mental health issues affect many women in prisons due to different forms of prison torture and trauma. Furthermore, Sangoi and Goshin (2014, p. 137) established that incarcerated "women and girls" experience trauma associated with "gender-based violence at rates that far exceed the general population".

### **Subtheme 3: A Blueprint for Social Reintegration**

The effects of long-term incarceration, and, consequently, the psychological pain inflicted on prisoners because of the long sentences imposed on them, evoke deep-seated emotions of hopelessness and apprehension about the future. Yet, as the

participants inferred, participation in ODL-mediated higher education provides a pathway to reformation, by providing tangible opportunities to prepare for “life after life” (i.e., beyond incarceration and into social reintegration). Despite serving long-term prison sentences, a sense of remarkable hope existed in the participants that their participation in ODL-mediated higher education was indispensable for their reintegrating into society. Participant 3 recounted the following:

*“[Education] has opened my mind again; with the degree I’m studying, I do believe that I will be able to use it outside, and I am actually quite excited about the possibilities of applying my knowledge and skills in the future.”* [Participant 3]

This extract underscored the notion that participation in higher education provides opportunities to think beyond the prison confines and, more profoundly, offers a glimmer of hope for a second chance at life. A similar view was shared by Participant 4, who optimistically remarked the following about her imminent social reintegration:

*“I personally don’t see education as a time-pusher, rather, it is a developer, you know, with all the skills and knowledge gained, it is something I will use outside.”* [Participant 4].

In this regard, higher education can be construed as playing a pivotal role in helping these women to plan and prepare for life beyond incarceration, thus offering a blueprint for social reintegration. Through education, incarcerated individuals gain valuable skills and knowledge which they believe will empower them to succeed outside of prison and reintegrate into society, as this excerpt indicated:

*“I study just to improve my portfolio so that when I go outside at least I’ve got something to back me up.”* [Participant 6]

This subtheme explored the transformative role of ODL-mediated higher education in the social reintegration of students facing long-term incarceration. It also affirmed that participation in ODL-mediated higher education offers hope, meaning and a sense of purpose for long-term sentenced offenders, representing a tangible pathway to life after prison and serving as a cornerstone of the social reintegration process. Like a “closed vessel”, the psychological toll of a prolonged sentence diminishes the ability to think freely and imaginatively beyond prison walls, when it comes to planning for social reintegration.

Yet the participants expressed optimism, viewing their incarceration as an opportunity to help reconstruct their childhood aspirations of receiving/continuing/completing higher education. They used education as a buffer and coping strategy against psychological manifestations such as stress, lethargy and boredom, thus reinforcing the idea that ODL-mediated higher education serves as a blueprint for their successful reintegration.

**RQ2: What challenges do incarcerated female students serving life sentences experience whilst studying through ODL?**

#### 4.2 Access to Learning Resources is a Privilege, rather than a Basic Human Right

While education offers a pathway for self-reclamation, systemic barriers within the prison environment complicate its pursuit. The extracts below highlighted significant barriers to accessing education within the prison system.

*"Look, I think we have learnt being in prison is a challenge. Being here is hard, with my experience, I came in here doing an MBA and, during trial, I was not allowed to study. It was like a big favour for me to continue with my studies."* [Participant 3]

Participant 2 was visibly emotional while recounting her ordeal of almost missing an examination due to officials' ignorance. Here, she expressed her frustrations with officials who do not do their jobs:

*"If you don't tell three or four people you're writing [an exam] that day and shout like a crazy person at the gate, nobody is going to come help you. So, I throw a tantrum... that's the key. There's no other way, because if you don't speak up, and speak up very loudly, nobody cares."* [Participant 2]

The library was recognised as one of the most critical venues for incarcerated students as its environment was conducive for studying, carrying out research, taking part in organised activities, accessing supplementary learning material and interacting with fellow students concerning their studies. Yet Participant 1 revealed that prison officials serving as librarians do not adhere to library opening and closing hours:

*"Sometimes we need to consult the library, and they don't open the gates. I try not to be too demanding, because if you are too demanding, then it's like [sigh] you feel entitled, and that sense of entitlement is unappreciated here."* [Participant 1]

The learning centre within correctional facilities was another meeting place where students were able to consult the teaching staff and made requests for additional academic support. One participant questioned the attitude of the prison learning centre officials, as captured below:

*"You go there [school office] and sometimes she [the educator] is unavailable and it's a problem to get out of the gate... Once I waited the whole week to query my study material before I could see her and was told I am pushy and shouldn't come here until they call me."* [Participant 7]

Participant 8 added another dimension to this discourse by expressing her disapproval of prison officials who did not act creatively to prevent disruptions to teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Even when prior arrangements were made to access the learning facilities, prison officials would renege on that agreement, as this comment indicates:

*"... [with the Covid-19 restrictions] we really struggled; it was hectic because the schoolteachers were not here; they were on lockdown and sometimes members attended courses for a whole week or weeks. For those weeks, it was on and off... Monday on, Monday off, and we felt helpless. In June, we wrote the online exams, and I was always fighting with the members because [crosstalk]...in this section, members don't understand*

*how important that time to study is...[crosstalk]... They're like, "Don't you know the schools are closed? The schools are closed." [Participant 8]*

It can be deduced from this extract that the participants regarded prison educators as being somewhat unreliable and inconsistent in rendering student support. Additionally, the lack of contingency planning in crisis situations, such as the Covid-19 restrictions, exposed their lack of proactiveness in protecting the inmates' right to education. This contributed to a sense of helplessness and frustration among students and resulted in a disjointed learning experience. This further illustrates that correctional education was deprioritised during a public health crisis, leaving incarcerated students unsupported. Aligning with the findings of Mafilika and Marongwe (2024) and Mbatha and Khohliso (2025), participants in this study highlighted unprofessional behaviour by prison officials and negative attitudes toward offenders' education as major factors contributing to ineffective student support processes, and an unfavourable learning environment in prison learning centres.

It is apparent from the participants' narratives that they had limited access to crucial facilities, the first being the library. The conduct (of prison officials) contravenes Rule 64 of the so-called Mandela Rules (United Nations' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners) (UNODC, 2015), which categorically states that *"every prison shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it"*.

The other issue raised by the participants pointed to the denial of access to the learning centre which the students used for study purposes. Key issues which the participants raised, included a non-conducive teaching and learning climate, and limited or ineffective intervention from management, compounded by the shortage of, and limited access to, critical facilities such as classrooms (Mafilika & Marongwe, 2024). The participants further cited prison officials' hostility and non-committal attitude towards their work as the main contributors to the limited access and poor delivery of academic support services.

Similarly, in their study, Ahmed et al. (2019) found that although a few dedicated prison officials went beyond the call of duty to assist where they could, the overwhelming majority were incompetent at their work and were merely there to secure a salary. This finding thus depicts correctional officials as ignoring policy dictates and lacking a sense of commitment to their job descriptions and the ideals of *ubuntu*. By implication, the manner in which they carry themselves is in conflict with the *Batho Pele* principles and Nodding's (1984) ethics of care.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study was curated to answer the research questions: What motivates incarcerated female students serving life sentences to pursue higher education, and what challenges do they experience while studying through the ODL-mediated higher education mode? This study found that participation in higher education offers several benefits for long-term sentenced offenders and can serve

as a coping mechanism by rekindling childhood ambitions and academic aspirations disrupted by incarceration. Despite numerous institutional challenges, such as limited access to learning resources, higher education can still be used to prepare and broaden access to disenfranchised students and propel their dreams to greater academic heights. The discussion of extant literature and the thematically processed focus group interview data encapsulated the hegemony in the prison education system, as well as the complex relationship between incarceration and education, in terms of which it was established that participants regard distance higher education as a rare and much-needed opportunity for a second chance at life, to reconstruct lost childhood dreams and find meaning through academic pursuits.

It also emerged that studying via distance education served as a coping mechanism that restored hope and opportunity for the reformation of incarcerated female students serving life in prison, in times of distress. Barriers entailed restricted access to crucial facilities, specifically the libraries and learning centres which students use for academic, networking, research and knowledge-sharing purposes. As a result, most incarcerated students experienced difficulties in completing *“assignments, engag[ing] with course content, and fully benefit[ting] from the educational programs offered”* (Ortiz et al., 2024, p. 2). The root cause of the status quo points to prison officials’ unbecoming behaviour and disregard for policies and procedures, which create poor student support systems, and subvert social equity and procedural fairness.

The correctional staff’s behaviour towards the students’ educational opportunities highlighted a form of social control whereby students must navigate the prison’s power structures to pursue their education. This further entrenches the hegemony of the correctional staff, as they hold the power to grant or deny access to education, with little regard for policy and prison norms and standards.

The system’s structure also invariably propels students to advocate for themselves, often in drastic ways, as exemplified by one participant’s verbatim quote: *“If you don’t speak up and speak up very loudly, nobody cares.”* Frustrated students resort to approaching the courts to reclaim their right to education, as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Education, the Mandela Rules, and various other localised supporting frameworks, including the Kampala Declaration on Prison Conditions in Africa (PRI, 1996), and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996).

Conclusively, the study’s findings outlined an urgent need to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of higher education for long-term sentenced offenders. It is recommended that correctional centres implement equitable, gender-responsive student support frameworks. These frameworks should have clearly defined standard operating procedures for correctional staff, improved infrastructure where centres are equipped with functional libraries and dedicated study spaces, while UNISA optimises their educational hubs, ensuring reliable functionality.

The study is not without its limitations. The first is the small sample size. Unisa students serving life sentences in South African women's correctional facilities are rare and hard-to-reach population due to their minute numbers. As a result, the researchers could only locate eight participants which limits the generalisability of the findings. Including more participants or centres could increase the robustness of the findings. The researchers also acknowledge that the study does not assess the nature of the inmates' crimes and the legal justifications for their sentences due to its limited scope. Despite the researchers' efforts to extract nuggets of data from the participants, in hindsight, some processes could have unfolded better. Thus, the third and final limitation in the study occurred when some participants admitted to feeling intimidated by the presence of the internal guide during the focus group interviews.

Consequently, some interview questions were not answered with relative ease and comfort, for fear of retribution. To mitigate this limitation in future studies and promote a neutral, non-threatening environment conducive to honest sharing, the researchers recommend avoiding the close proximity of internal guides during data collection sessions, as their presence may inhibit open dialogue.

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