Reducing Recidivism through Correctional Education: Collaboration between Nigeria Correctional Service and NOUN Correctional Study Centres

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Abstract

Correctional education has emerged as a cornerstone of modern rehabilitative penology, shifting penal objectives from retributive punishment to offender reformation and successful social reintegration. This study evaluates the collaborative correctional education framework established by the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCS) and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Special Study Centres. Using a qualitative research design rooted in secondary data analysis and guided by Rehabilitation Theory, the study examines the programmatic objectives of higher education within Nigerian custodial facilities, its impact on reducing recidivism, and the structural challenges undermining its efficacy. The findings indicate that the NCS-NOUN partnership effectively provides marginalized inmates with tuition-free access to tertiary education, significantly fostering self-efficacy, cognitive restructuring, and post-release employability. Crucially, the research demonstrates that when inmates are granted autonomy in course selection rather than being subjected to a rigid, top-down curriculum, post-release outcomes improve. However, systemic bottlenecks—specifically severe overcrowding, acute funding deficits, infrastructural decay, lack of robust post-release aftercare services, and pervasive societal stigmatization—obstruct the long-term rehabilitative potential of these initiatives. The study recommends systemic legislative and budgetary reforms, structured transitional aftercare, and the adoption of participatory, modern digital curricula to sustain the desistance pathways of reformed individuals.

Keywords: Correctional Education, Recidivism, Rehabilitation, Nigerian Correctional Service, National Open University of Nigeria.

Introduction

Penal institutions globally are transitioning from traditional retributive custody toward a rehabilitative ideal designed to reform offenders and facilitate productive societal reintegration (Ahmed et al., 2025; Henriksson, 2024).

Historically, incarceration focused primarily on incapacitation and deterrence. However, persistently high global reoffending rates have highlighted the inadequacy of purely punitive models in achieving long-term public safety (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). For instance, progressive Nordic penal systems, such as those in Norway and Sweden, prioritize humane containment and comprehensive rehabilitation through education, vocational training, and psychological counseling, resulting in five-year recidivism rates of around 20% (Kruttschnitt, 2016). In contrast, many developing nations continue to grapple with overcrowded, punitive custodial environments where recidivism remains high due to systemic neglect and lack of structural reform (Okafor & Uche, 2021).

In Nigeria, the formal recognition of this paradigm shift culminated in the passage of the **Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019**. This legislation renamed the former "Nigerian Prisons Service" to the "Nigerian Correctional Service" (NCS), signaling a statutory transition toward rehabilitation, reformation, and reintegration (Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019). Despite this policy reorientation, Nigerian correctional facilities continue to face severe operational bottlenecks, including extreme congestion and a high proportion of awaiting-trial inmates who are disconnected from formal reform programs (Ezeala & Okorie, 2025).

A major intervention addressing these issues is the institutional partnership between the Nigerian Correctional Service and the **National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)**, established to provide tuition-free higher education to incarcerated individuals (National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN, 2022). Empirical literature demonstrates that correctional education serves as a powerful mechanism for lowering recidivism by providing inmates with cognitive skills, vocational competencies, and academic credentials that mitigate the socio-economic vulnerabilities driving criminal behavior (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013). By offering pathways to university-level degrees, the NCS-NOUN partnership aims to restructure inmate identity, replace antisocial cognitive patterns with prosocial aspirations, and build human capital (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Statement of the Problem

While the statutory mission of the Nigerian Correctional Service focuses on rehabilitation, translating policy into practice remains challenging. Research indicates that a large percentage of incarcerated individuals lack access to functional educational or vocational training during confinement, and more than half of those released are rearrested within two years (Adebayo & Ojo, 2019). Furthermore, institutional providers are often poorly equipped, and custodial environments frequently lack the resources to deliver effective rehabilitative programming (Abdullahi, 2022). This deficit is compounded by severe societal stigmatization and an absence of formal post-release aftercare, making it difficult for ex-offenders to secure employment or housing (Ugwuoke, 2020).

Although NOUN has established Special Correctional Study Centres across major custodial facilities in Nigeria to offer open and distance learning (ODL), there remains a need to systematically evaluate how these programs are implemented, their empirical impact on recidivism, and the structural limitations they face. This study addresses these gaps by pursuing three main objectives:

1. To evaluate the objectives of correctional education as outlined by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Special Correctional Study Centres.
2. To investigate how effectively correctional education has helped reduce recidivism among its participants.
3. To identify the structural challenges facing correctional education in Nigeria and suggest potential policy and practice solutions.

Theoretical Framework: Rehabilitation Theory

To analyze the impact of correctional education on recidivism, this study is grounded in **Rehabilitation Theory.** Rehabilitation Theory is not a singular doctrine but an evolving penological framework shaped by several key theorists. The conceptual foundation of modern rehabilitation was articulated by legal scholar Francis A. Allen (1959, 1981), who defined the "rehabilitative ideal" as the belief that criminal behavior is determined by social, psychological, or biological factors, and can be systematically altered through therapeutic and educational interventions. In contemporary psychology and criminology, the scientific application of rehabilitation is guided by Donald Andrews, James Bonta, and Paul Gendreau (1990, 2010). In their **Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model:** The RNR model asserts that effective rehabilitation must target high-risk offenders (Risk principle), focus on dynamic factors directly linked to reoffending, such as education or cognitive distortions (Need principle), and deliver interventions in a manner suited to the offender's learning style (Responsivity principle). Tony Ward and Shadd Maruna (2007) on the other hand developed **The Good Lives Model (GLM).** GLM is a strength-based alternative to the deficit-focused RNR model. It suggests that rehabilitation is most effective when it equips offenders with the skills and opportunities to secure primary human goods (such as inner peace, knowledge, and relationships) through constructive, prosocial means.

The core tenets of rehabilitative theory are anchored in the ontological premise that human behavior is fundamentally malleable, rejecting purely retributive sentencing in favor of customized treatment plans. This perspective posits that criminal tendencies are not immutable traits; rather, behaviors driven by socio-economic marginalization or cognitive errors can be systematically unlearned through targeted education, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and vocational training (Martín-Coca, 2026). To achieve this, the theory mandates an individualized assessment process to ensure penal interventions align precisely with the specific cognitive and developmental needs of each individual (Wahi, 2021). Effective rehabilitative interventions must laser-focus on dynamic risk factors—frequently termed criminogenic needs—such as educational deficits, lack of employment skills, and substance abuse, which directly influence an individual's likelihood of reoffending (Klapow et al., 2025). Ultimately, the primary purpose of penal system interaction is social restoration, aiming to successfully reintegrate offenders into the community as self-reliant, law-abiding citizens (Henriksson, 2024).

Despite these noble aspirations, the practical and philosophical application of rehabilitative theory faces significant weaknesses and critiques, starting with the historical "nothing works" critique. Popularized by Robert Martinson (1974), this critique argues that formal rehabilitative programs have negligible effects on recidivism when they are implemented within traditional, inherently criminogenic prison environments (Logan & Gaes, 1993), particularly because deeply habituated or antisocial personality traits often resist behavioral change and lead to high failure rates among repeat offenders (Logan, 2025). Furthermore, critics argue that mandated rehabilitation programs frequently suffer from paternalism and coerced conformity, forcing outward compliance to secure release without fostering genuine, internal psychological change (Storgaard, 2024). This focus on progress-based release also triggers the "just deserts" conflict with retributive theorists, who contend that tying the duration of confinement to perceived rehabilitative progress rather than the objective severity of the crime committed results in highly inconsistent and unjust sentencing (van Ginneken, 2016). Finally, these theoretical goals are severely bottlenecked by contextual and resource limitations; in developing nations like Nigeria, the systemic execution of rehabilitative theory is heavily constrained by overcrowded facilities, a lack of instructional technology, and a chronic shortage of trained behavioral experts, making high-fidelity intervention nearly impossible to implement (Ezeala & Okorie, 2025).

Literature Review

The Concept of Recidivism

At its conceptual foundation, **recidivism** is defined as an individual's relapse into criminal behavior after they have already undergone legal sanctions or rehabilitative interventions for a previous offense (National Institute of Justice, 2025). Rooted in the Latin term *recidere* (meaning "to fall back"), it serves as the primary metric for evaluating the efficacy of correctional institutions, community supervision, and clinical therapy programs. The American Psychological Association (2018) expands upon this by characterizing recidivism as a habitual pattern of repeat offenses, which is particularly pronounced among chronic offenders who have experienced multiple cycles of conviction and punishment. Because it signals a failure of both deterrence and rehabilitation, understanding the mechanisms behind recidivism remains one of the central focuses of modern penology.

While the theoretical definition of recidivism is widely accepted, its empirical measurement is highly complex and varies significantly across jurisdictions. Criminologists typically track recidivism using distinct legal and systemic benchmarks, most notably re-arrest, reconviction, re-incarceration, or official re-contact rates within a designated post-release window (McLeod, 2025). The choice of which benchmark to use has profound policy and statistical implications. For instance, as highlighted by the Council on Criminal Justice (2025), relying strictly on

"return-to-prison" rates as the primary metric can yield vastly different statistical outcomes and success rates compared to tracking broad "re-arrest" data, which captures any subsequent police contact regardless of formal prosecution. Consequently, standardizing these operational definitions is critical for policymakers seeking to accurately measure the success of justice reinvestment and prison reform initiatives.

Recidivism is defined as the relapse of an individual into criminal behavior, typically measured by rearrest, reconviction, or reincarceration within a specified post-release period (Bales & Piquero, 2015). High recidivism rates indicate systemic gaps in correctional programs and place a heavy burden on public safety and state resources (Visher & Travis, 2011).

In criminology, reoffending is understood as a complex outcome driven by interacting factors, including low educational attainment, lack of vocational skills, economic marginalization, and substance abuse (Western & Pettit, 2010). Studies indicate that individuals who do not participate in structured rehabilitative or educational activities during confinement are significantly more likely to reoffend than those who do (Bouffard et al., 2020). In Nigeria, this vulnerability is worsened by a lack of transitional support and persistent social stigmatization, which often leaves ex-offenders with few legitimate survival pathways post-release (Ugwuoke, 2020).

Objectives of Correctional Education in Nigeria

Correctional education refers to academic and technical instruction provided within custodial facilities to support offender reform, personal growth, and cognitive restructuring. In Nigeria, the partnership between the NCS and NOUN represents a major formal academic intervention, establishing Special Study Centres across several custodial facilities to provide tuition-free undergraduate and postgraduate education (NOUN, 2021; NOUN, 2022). These centres include: Abakaliki Medium Security Custodial Centre, Abeokuta Correctional Special Study Centre, Ikoyi Medium Security Custodial Centre, Ilesha Correctional Service Special Study Centre, Kaduna Correctional Service Special Study Centre, Kuje Correctional Service Special Study Centre, Lafia Correctional Service Special Study Centre, Awka Correctional Service Special Study Centre, Keffi Correctional Service Special Study Centre, Nigerian Maximum Correctional Service Special Study Centre in Kirikiri Lagos, and the Umuahia Correctional Service Special Study Centre, along with the Warri Correctional Service Special Study Centres (NOUN, 2021; NOUN 2022).

These centres allow inmates to enroll in degree programs in fields such as Business Administration, Criminology, and Peace Studies (NOUN, 2021; NOUN, 2022). By addressing the educational deficits common among incarcerated populations, the program aims to enhance self-esteem, build marketable professional skills, and improve post-release employment prospects (Adebayo & Ogunlade, 2023).

Reducing Recidivism through Correctional Education

Empirical research consistently shows a strong inverse relationship between educational participation during incarceration and post-release reoffending (Bozick et al., 2018). In the Nigerian context, tertiary education programs run by NOUN and vocational training programs run by the NCS have been shown to improve post-release adjustment and lower reoffending rates (Akinseye et al., 2021; Ugwuoke, 2020). Beyond offering technical credentials, correctional education fosters critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, and analytical problem-solving (Ola & Adebayo, 2020).

However, the efficacy of these educational interventions depends heavily on how they are delivered. Adult education principles highlight the importance of learner autonomy and participatory instruction. When inmates are excluded from selecting their courses of study or when programs rely on rigid, instructor-centered methods, motivation declines, and the rehabilitative impact is minimized (Ezeala & Okorie, 2025). Conversely, programs that support learner agency and offer high-quality instruction have been shown to significantly improve

inmates' self-efficacy and employment prospects, helping them transition more successfully into the post-release labor market (Oduntan et al., 2022).

Challenges in Nigerian Correctional Education

Despite the significant strides made in enhancing correctional education for inmate rehabilitation in Nigeria, several ongoing challenges still hinder its effectiveness. One of the biggest hurdles is the lack of adequate funding. With limited financial resources, the quality, reach, and accessibility of educational programs suffer, resulting in outdated materials and a shortage of qualified instructors (Olaleye, 2021). Additionally, overcrowded prison facilities create serious logistical issues, as the high number of inmates leads to competition for space and makes it difficult to establish organized learning environments (Adebayo & Olofin, 2020).

Another major obstacle is the stigma that ex-inmates face after their release. Even when they have gained valuable skills, many find themselves discriminated against in the job market due to policies that discourage hiring former convicts. This not only undermines their reintegration but also raises the chances of them reoffending (Okon & Adetunji, 2022). Moreover, the lack of consistency in educational policies across different correctional facilities prevents the development of standardized curricula and uniform program delivery, leading to varied outcomes (Oladipo & Adebayo, 2022). Finally, the absence of effective partnerships between the public and private sectors limits opportunities for hands-on training and job placements after release, which ultimately affects the long-term success of rehabilitation efforts (Chukwu & Adebanjo, 2022).

Materials and Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis to evaluate the role of the NCS-NOUN partnership in reducing recidivism. The data collection process involved a systematic search of scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and official government and institutional portals (such as the NCS and NOUN repositories). The search strategy targeted publications from the last five years (2021–2026) to ensure the literature remains contemporary. The search employed specific keywords and Boolean operators, including: "Correctional Education" AND "Recidivism" AND "Nigeria", "NOUN" AND "Correctional Centers" AND "Rehabilitation", and "Offender Reintegration" AND "Nigerian Correctional Service". A total of 40 publications were initially retrieved. Following a screening for thematic relevance, methodological quality, and publication date, 11 articles were excluded. The remaining 29 publications were subjected to a thematic analysis focused on: the organizational and academic objectives of the NCS-NOUN partnership; the empirical relationship between higher education and recidivism reduction; and the structural and socio-cultural barriers to successful offender reintegration in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The thematic integration of the analyzed literature reveals several key findings regarding correctional education in Nigeria.

First, empirical evidence confirms that tertiary education behind bars serves as an important driver of personal change. Inmates who participate in NOUN degree programs report significant improvements in self-efficacy, cognitive development, and post-release hopefulness (Oduntan et al., 2022). The structure of academic engagement helps inmates shift their self-identity away from criminal labels toward a positive social identity as university students (Akinseye et al., 2021). This shift is critical for reducing recidivism, as it provides a cognitive buffer against reoffending (Okafor & Uche, 2021).

Second, the structure of the educational delivery model directly influences its rehabilitative value. Findings highlight that adult learners, including incarcerated individuals, benefit from participatory, learner-centered instruction and autonomy in course selection (Ezeala & Okorie,

2025). When curricula are rigidly imposed without input from the learners, inmate engagement decreases, which can undermine the program's effectiveness and lead to higher rates of reoffending (Ezeala & Okorie, 2025). Conversely, allowing inmates to choose their courses aligns with the principles of Rehabilitation Theory by building a sense of personal agency and responsibility (Oduntan et al., 2022).

Third, the long-term success of correctional education is heavily dependent on post-release conditions. While acquiring a university degree or vocational skill during incarceration provides a strong foundation, the absence of transitional support services often limits these benefits (Eze & Chukwuemeka, 2020). Ex-offenders in Nigeria face significant hurdles, including employer discrimination and a lack of access to financial capital or housing (Okon & Adetunji, 2022). Without formal reintegration assistance, the economic difficulties of the post-release environment can push individuals back into criminal networks, regardless of their educational achievements (Ugwuoke, 2020).

Finally, structural and institutional issues within the Nigerian correctional system continue to limit the reach of these educational programs. Acute funding shortages restrict the modernization of classrooms, laboratories, and workshops, while extreme overcrowding overburdens existing facilities (Adebayo & Olofin, 2020; Olaleye, 2021). Consequently, while the NOUN partnership represents a valuable policy development, its practical impact remains limited to a relatively small segment of the inmate population, leaving many without access to formal reform programs (Ezeala & Okorie, 2025).

Conclusion

Correctional education, as exemplified by the partnership between the Nigerian Correctional Service and the National Open University of Nigeria, plays a vital role in offender rehabilitation and recidivism reduction. Grounded in Rehabilitation Theory, these programs help restructure antisocial cognitions, build human capital, and offer pathways to legitimate post-release employment. However, systemic challenges within the Nigerian criminal justice system—including severe facility congestion, funding deficits, infrastructural decay, lack of transitional aftercare, and societal stigmatization—continue to limit the overall effectiveness of these initiatives. To realize the full potential of correctional education, Nigeria must move beyond a policy focus on rehabilitation and address the underlying resource and structural constraints within its correctional institutions.

Recommendations

To improve the quality and reach of correctional education and strengthen recidivism-reduction efforts in Nigeria, the following actions are recommended:

1. **Strengthen Post-Release Transitional Support:** The federal and state governments should establish formal aftercare programs providing job-placement services, housing assistance, and mentorship to help ex-offenders transition into the labor market.
2. **Increase and Diversify Funding:** Budgetary allocations for correctional rehabilitation should be increased, supplemented by public-private partnerships (PPPs) with corporate entities, NGOs, and civil society organizations to modernize educational facilities.
3. **Address Custodial Overcrowding:** Judicial reforms should be accelerated to reduce the population of awaiting-trial inmates, freeing up institutional resources and improving the learning environment within correctional facilities.
4. **Modernize and Standardize Curricula:** The NCS and NOUN should update and align their educational and vocational offerings with the modern digital economy, incorporating training in software engineering, data science, and digital literacy.
5. **Promote Fair-Chance Employment**

Policies: Legislative measures should be introduced to protect rehabilitated ex-offenders from employment discrimination, supported by public awareness campaigns to reduce social stigma and encourage successful reintegration.

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