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# ***Brain Cells:*** *Listening to prisoner learners*

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**A joint project by Prisoners Education Trust,  
Inside Time and RBE Consultancy Ltd**

**2009**

**insidetime**  
the National Newspaper for Prisoners



Rushbrook • Billington • Ellis Consultancy

## Foreword

Being in prison is tough. Yet, it does offer opportunities for those prisoners who want to reform and find a path towards a crime-free life. One of the key areas of opportunity is in prison education. Learning new skills, acquiring new qualifications or knowledge can have a profound impact for those prisoners who engage in education. Education, as this report shows, changes prisoners and enables them to plan a different future for life after release.

Providing education and training to meet the needs of all prisoners is extremely demanding. Prisoners come from all walks of life, have a variety of social and life experience and represent all races, cultures and religions. The age range in a prison classroom may vary from 22 to over 70. Some prisoners will have drug or alcohol dependency problems or mental health conditions. More than 50% of male prisoners and more than 66% of female prisoners have no qualifications at all. This might be the result of a traumatic home life, undiagnosed learning difficulties or social alienation. The end result is that many prisoners are likely to have been disproportionately disadvantaged in relation to education and learning before entering the prison system.

There are severe problems in making prison education work. Some are the inevitable results of prison regimes which must give priority to security. Others arise from the current levels of overcrowding across the prison estate. Prisoners can be moved at short notice, classes or courses can be interrupted and the same curriculum is not always available at the next prison. Some learning records may not be transferred. Access to books, learning equipment and information and communication technology (ICT) varies from prison to prison. Most prisoners have little access to the telephone, no email communication with tutors and no internet access. Distance learning might be the right option, but it may not be possible to get funding to pay for it.

Despite these problems, education happens in prisons and it does work. This report gives a snapshot of attitudes and activities and includes some very positive themes. Prisoners affirm strongly the support they receive from prison education staff. Many prisoners act in voluntary roles supporting other learners with many aiming to continue learning after release. This report also highlights the challenges facing education in prisons. In particular, the need to encourage prison officers in their support for prisoner learning, the need to ensure continuity of learning when prisoners are transferred and the need to make better use of ICT as a tool for learning.

The findings in this report are important because they enable us to hear the voice and experience of prisoners themselves. Education cannot and should not be a passive transfer of knowledge. The participation and response of the learner is crucial to its success. So we need to hear what prisoners think and how they experience education inside, finding ways to work with them to make prison education as effective as it can possibly be.

Prisoner voice should also be an essential element in framing policy about prisoner learning. They are in a position to give feedback on the effectiveness of present policy and their experience can point out the strengths and weaknesses of what is provided. This report is a contribution towards building a constructive, lively and robust account of how prisoners view education inside.

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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Aims of the survey**

This Report was commissioned by the Prisoners Education Trust *Offender Learning Matters* project, working with *Inside Time*, the newspaper for prisoners. The report summarises the results of a survey prepared jointly by the Trust and *Inside Time*, published by them in October 2008. The primary aim was to explore prisoners' experiences of education and learning in prison, in the context of their educational achievements before entering custody and their aspirations for life after release.

## **1.2 Methods**

The survey contained 36 questions covering the profile of respondents, their experiences and perceptions of the education and learning in which they had, (or had not), participated whilst in custody. It also explored prisoners' expectations and aspirations in relation to life after release and the impact of learning on life chances. The survey can be viewed on the web at: <http://www.insidetime.org/backissues/Education%20Supplement.pdf>

As prisoners have no access to the internet or email, responses were filled out voluntarily and by hand. In most cases, only one response could be obtained per copy of *Inside Time* delivered to the prison. In a few cases, prison staff photocopied the survey for prisoners. The Trust provided a freepost address for returns.

## **1.3 Responses**

There were 468 responses to the survey. It was clear from the appearance of the completed surveys that prisoners had treated it with respect. Prisoners were not supervised when responding to the survey; they answered or omitted to answer questions as they saw fit. As with any survey, response rates to particular questions varied and the picture emerging from the results is complex.

Since the survey was voluntary, the responses received are likely to have come from those motivated to express their views. It should also be noted that completing the survey required a reasonable level of literacy. A number of questions in the survey allowed respondents to give multiple answers. In the findings below, these questions are marked with the symbol †.

Prisoners with learning difficulties or disabilities, or who see no relevance in education are least likely to have participated in this survey. Therefore, their views and needs are missing. The voice heard in this report is that of prisoners committed to learning and to improving the conditions and facilities for learning. We thank them.

## **1.4 About the Prisoners Education Trust**

Prisoners Education Trust was founded in 1989, to widen educational opportunities for prisoners. Today it funds distance and other learning courses for prisoners in a wide range of academic and vocational subjects, as well as providing advice and support for prisoner learners. The Trust currently funds over 2,000 courses per year in prisons throughout England and Wales. Feedback from some of the 17,000 prisoners funded by the Trust over the last 20 years provides evidence that access to learning, and progression in learning are crucial elements in the process of change which transforms lives and leads offenders away from further crime.

## **1.5 About Inside Time**

*Inside Time* is the national 'not for profit' newspaper for prisoners, established in 1990. Over 46,000 copies of each monthly issue are distributed free of charge to all establishments throughout the UK prison estate.

Thousands of letters, articles, short stories and poetry are sent in by prisoners each year and every effort is made to publish as many of these items as possible. To this end, more pages are added whenever finances allow and currently each monthly issue ranges from between 48 to 60 pages.

The website [www.insidetime.org](http://www.insidetime.org) used primarily by prisoners' families, the media and organisations involved in penal affairs receives up to 5000 hits per day.

## **1.6 About RBE Consultancy**

RBE Consultancy Limited works with a wide range of agencies across the public and not-for-profit sectors. These include the Department of Health, primary care trusts and local authorities in London and the UK.

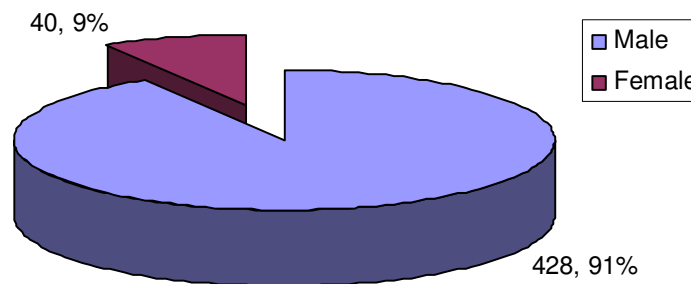
RBE provides a broad spectrum of services to its clients, including the evaluation of projects, services and agencies, the development of strategies and service plans and the provision of training to meet operational demands. RBE draws on the experience and expertise of a range of Associate Consultants, utilising this diverse pool of skills and abilities to meet the demands of individual contracts. The three Directors of RBE have worked as senior managers within the NHS and the not-for-profit sector, managing both national and local services. Between them they have over 10 years experience of delivering consultancy services.

## 2 Profile of Respondents

### 2.1 Gender

Respondents were asked to state whether they were male or female (question 1 of the survey). 92% (428/468) who answered this question were male, with 9% (40/468) being female. The proportion of females answering the survey is slightly higher than the proportion of women in the general prison population which was 5% in 2008<sup>1</sup>. Figure 1 below, shows the breakdown of respondents by gender.

Figure 1:  
Survey respondents  
by gender

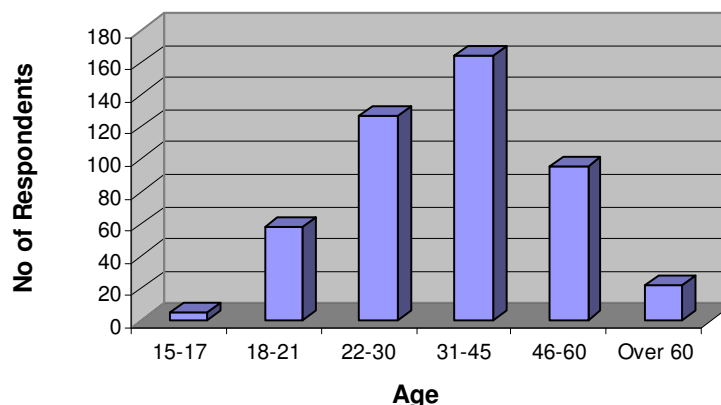


### 2.2 Age

82% (238/471) of respondents were between the ages of 22 and 60, with nearly 35% (164/471) being aged 31 to 45. The percentage of respondents aged 18 to 21 (12.3% or 58/471) is similar to that of the general prison population where 11.5% are aged between 18 and 20<sup>2</sup>. 2.9% of the general prison population<sup>3</sup> is aged over 60; the percentage of the survey's respondents in this age group was slightly higher at 4.7% (22/471). The survey omitted questions about ethnicity.

Figure 2 below shows the answers to question 2 of the survey about ages of respondents.

Figure 2:  
Survey respondents  
by age



<sup>1</sup> On 21 November 2008 there were 4365 women in prisons in England and Wales (page 15) out of a total of 83,139 (page 4). Bromley Briefings, December 2008.

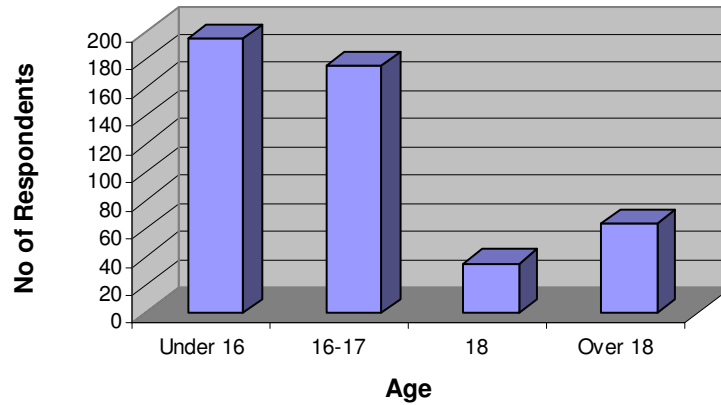
<sup>2</sup> In September 2008 there were 9,671 young people aged 18-20 in prison in England and Wales (page 21) out of a total of 83,139 (page 4). Bromley Briefings, December 2008.

<sup>3</sup> On 31 August 2008 there were 2,405 prisoners aged over 60 in England and Wales (page 27) out of a total of 83,139 (page 4). Bromley Briefings, December 2008.

### 2.3 Full-time education leaving age

When asked to indicate how old they were when they left full-time education (question 3), 80% (370/468) said they were aged under 18 and 14% (63/468) said they were over 18, which suggests the latter went on to further full-time education. Figure 3 below shows the breakdown of the ages of respondents when they left full-time education.

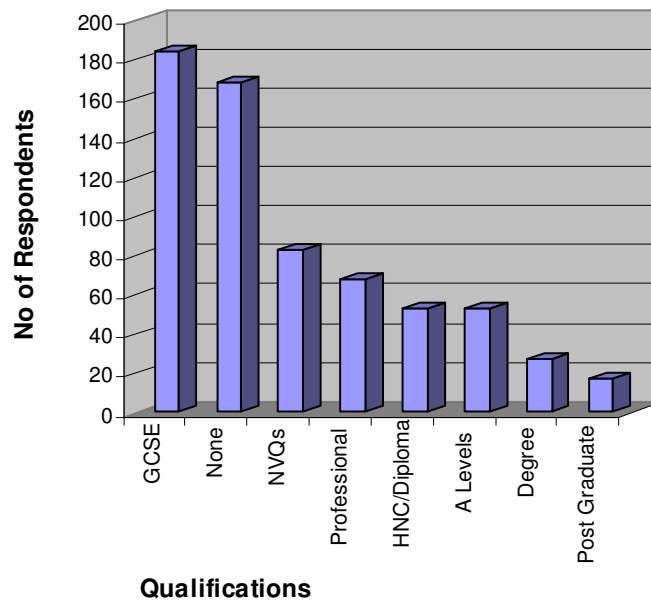
Figure 3:  
Age at which  
respondents left full-  
time education



### 2.4 Qualifications prior to coming into prison

Question 4<sup>†</sup> of the survey asked respondents to indicate what qualifications they had prior to coming into prison. 462 respondents answered this question with 108 respondents giving more than one answer.

Figure 4:  
Respondent  
Qualifications Prior  
to Coming into  
Prison<sup>†</sup>



36% (168/462) of respondents had no qualifications prior to coming into prison, with 6% (27/462) having a degree and 4% having a postgraduate degree. This level of qualifications is higher than the average for all prisoners<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> See “The problems and needs of newly sentenced prisoners: results from a national survey” at: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/research-problems-needs-prisoners.pdf>



## 2.5 Employment status before sentence

When respondents were asked in question 5 whether they were in continuous employment during the 12 months before their sentence, 48% (224/468) answered in the affirmative. This suggests that 52% (246/468) were unemployed at some point in the 12 months prior to sentence. This is above the national unemployment average (5%<sup>5</sup>), but is more in line with research that suggests a third of prisoners are unemployed at the time of imprisonment<sup>6</sup>.

## 2.6 Length of current sentence

Respondents were asked to state how long they had been in prison on their current sentence (question 6) and how much longer they expected to serve (question 7). Their answers are illustrated in Figures 5 and 6 below.

Figure 5:  
Length of time  
respondents  
have been in  
prison on  
current  
sentence



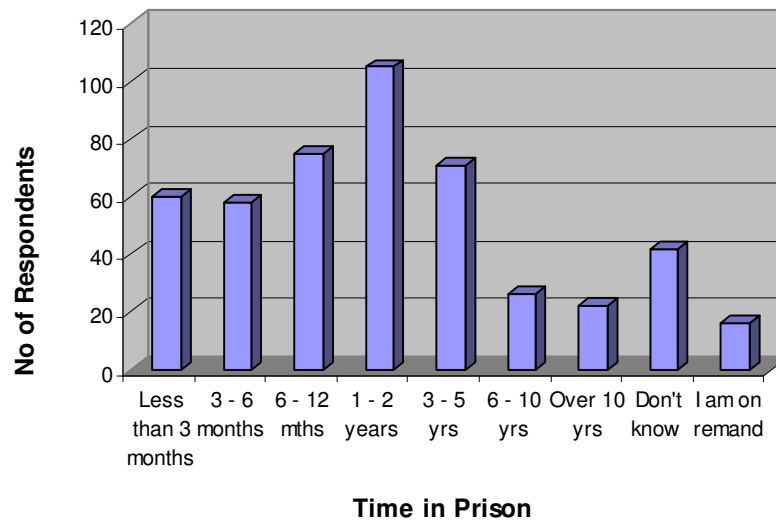
The number of respondents describing themselves as being on remand (3.4%, 16/475) is lower than the percentage of the general prison population which is on remand – 10.7%.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> UK National Statistics Online: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?ID=12>

<sup>6</sup> Page 37, Bromley Briefings, December 2008.

<sup>7</sup> At the end of September 2008 there were 8,884 unconvicted prisoners being held in prisons in England and Wales (page 13) out of a total of 83,139 (page 4). Bromley Briefings, December 2008.

Figure 6:  
Length of time  
respondents  
expect to still  
serve in prison  
on current  
sentence



## 2.7 Respondents by prison

Question 8 of the survey asked respondents to name the prison their responses were based on. 409 people answered this question. Respondents came from 105 out of approximately 140 prisons in England and Wales (therefore, 75% of prisons were represented in survey), with a further 4 respondents serving sentences in Scottish prisons. Table 1 below shows the top five prisons in terms of number of survey respondents.

Table 1:  
Top five  
prisons in  
terms of  
respondents

Prison Name	Number of Responses	Category
Lindholme	26	C
Stafford	14	C
Whatton	11	C
Wymott	10	C
Aylesbury	10	Young Offender Institute

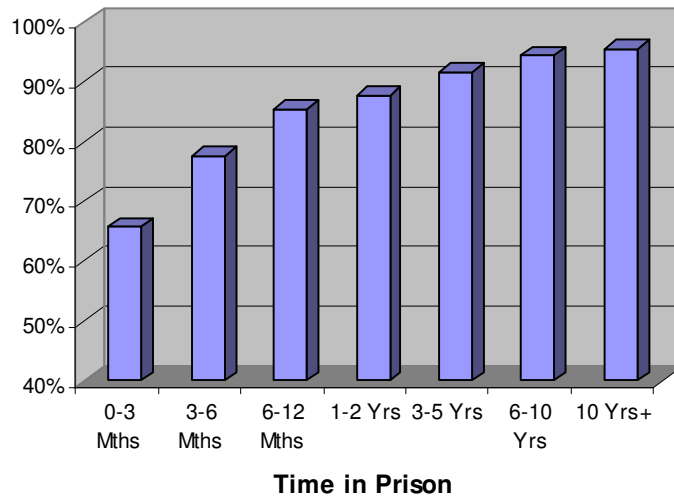
### 3 Prisoners' Learning Experiences in Prison

#### 3.1 Participation in educational or vocational training courses

When asked in question 9 if they had started or completed any educational or vocational training courses during their current prison sentence, 85% (399/468) said they had participated in educational or vocational training. This suggests that a high proportion of prisoners are engaged in educational activities. However, it may be that those participating in some kind of training are more likely to complete a survey about education in prisons. This proportion is also significantly higher than the figure quoted by The Offenders' Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) for the average monthly participation in prison education, which is 38% of all prisoners<sup>8</sup>. A slightly higher percentage of respondents aged 15 to 30 (87%, 163/188) had participated in educational or vocational training courses than those aged 46-60 (83%, 78/94).

Figure 7 below shows that, as you might expect, the longer a person stays in prison the more likely they are to partake in education or training. 66% (27/41) of respondents who have been in prison for three months or less are involved or have taken part in some form of education, compared to 96% (22/23) of respondents who have served ten years or more.

Figure 7:  
Percentage of respondents taking part in educational or vocational training courses during current sentence



#### 3.2 Prisoners not participating in education

70 respondents said they had not experienced any learning in prison during their current sentence. Their reasons for not doing so (question 9a<sup>+</sup>) are illustrated in Table 2 below.

The main barriers to prisoners accessing learning in prison appear to be systemic and practical rather than personal (i.e. motivational). 33% (23/70 respondents) indicated there were 'other reasons' for not experiencing education in prison. However, there was no space on the questionnaire for respondents to explain further what these reasons were.

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<sup>8</sup> *Meeting needs? The Offenders' Learning and Skills Service.*

Public Accounts Committee: Forty-seventh Report of Session 2007-08 Evidence. Q7, p.22:

<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.com/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmpublic/584/584.pdf>

Table 2:  
Reasons for non-participation in learning during current sentence

Reason	Responses	%
I haven't been allowed to start a course	17	24%
Lack of advice about courses	12	17%
Nothing was available at my level	11	16%
I keep being moved from prison to prison	10	14%
Didn't know what was available	10	14%
Courses and classes don't fit into my sentence plan	9	13%
I don't want to	1	1%
I don't think I could cope with learning at the moment	1	1%
Other reasons	23	33%

### 3.3 Types of courses participated in

Table 3 below summarises the types of courses prisoners said they had attended whilst in prison (question 9b<sup>+</sup>).

Table 3:  
Types of courses attended

Type of Course Participated In	Responses	%
Classes provided by the prison	298	72%
Distance learning course(s)	138	33%
Training leading to qualifications with prison work	104	25%
Involved in another type of training or educational course	94	23%
Peer to peer learning	45	11%

Nearly three quarters of respondents said they were participating in courses provided by the prison, with 25% (104/413) being involved in training leading to qualifications with prison work. A significant number of respondents stated they were involved in another type of training or educational course. These may include offending behaviour courses or courses provided through prison chaplaincy or other voluntary projects.

Women were more involved in distance learning than men (49%, 17/35 compared to 32%, 121/378). More women (34%, 12/35) were also participating in training leading to qualifications with prison work than men (24%, 92/378). A higher percentage of respondents aged 46-60 (42%, 35/83) had been involved in distance learning than respondents aged 15-30 (26%, 43/163). Respondents who stated they had pre-prison qualifications of A-level or above were more likely to be involved in distance learning than the average (46% compared to 33%). This same group was marginally less likely to have participated in training leading to qualifications with prison work (20% compared to an average of 25%).

### 3.4 Why respondents got involved with learning in prison

Question 10<sup>+</sup> of the survey asked respondents to give the reasons why they got involved in learning in prison. Respondents were able to give multiple answers.

Table 4 below illustrates that a high proportion of respondents said they were involved in learning to occupy their time usefully (73%, 300/414) or better themselves (69%, 285/414). Improving employment prospects after release (60%, 249/414) or gaining a qualification (58%, 240/414) are

also significant drivers for respondents to get involved in learning in prison. Conversely, external encouragement from either prison staff or family/friends either happens less frequently or has less impact.

Table 4:  
Why respondents got involved with learning in prison

Reason	Responses	%
To occupy my time usefully	300	73%
To better myself	285	69%
To improve my employment prospects on release	249	60%
To get a qualification	240	58%
To set myself a challenge/see if I could do it	157	38%
To pursue a particular interest	140	34%
I wanted my family/children to see that education matters and be proud of me	104	25%
I was encouraged by prison staff	49	12%
I was encouraged by a member of my family/friend to have a go	36	9%

Of the 137 respondents who did not have any qualifications and were involved in learning, 61% (84/137) said gaining a qualification was a reason why they got involved. This was only marginally higher than all respondents.

Of the 201 respondents who were not in continuous employment in the 12 months prior to their sentence and who were involved in educational activities, 126 (63%) gave improving employment prospects as a reason for being involved in education. This was only marginally higher than all respondents.

Women were slightly more inclined to occupy their time usefully than men (80%, 28/35 women, 72%, 272/379 men) but were less inclined to set themselves a challenge (26%, 9/35 women, 39%, 148/379 men). A higher percentage of men than women were encouraged by prison staff (12%, 47/379 men, 6%, 2/35 women) and by friends and family (9%, 35/379 men, 3%, 1/35 women).

### 3.5 How respondents found the learning experience

Table 5 below illustrates how respondents found the learning experience (question 11<sup>+</sup>).

Table 5:  
How respondents found the learning experience

How respondents found the learning experience	Responses	%
It was a constructive way to use my time	272	66%
I found it really useful and worthwhile	267	65%
It stimulated my mind/made me want to learn more	247	60%
It was tough going - there were so many distractions	58	14%
The learning on offer did not meet my needs	49	12%
The standard of teaching/my outside tutor was poor	34	8%
I dropped out before I had completed the course	16	4%
Other	30	7%

In the majority of cases respondents found their learning experience to be a positive one, with roughly two thirds finding it a constructive way to use their time and/or useful and worthwhile. Only 4% (16/411) of respondents dropped out before they completed the course which, when compared to adult education in general, is a very low drop-out rate. In contrast, in evidence given to the Public Accounts Committee Report on OLASS, the Chief Executive of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) gave the achievement related of OLASS provided classes as 55%, and compared this with the broader FE achievement rate of 66%<sup>9</sup>.

A range of ‘other’ responses were given, both positive and negative. These included:

*“It boosted my self confidence.”*

*“Educational support at this prison is disgraceful.”*

*“The Prison Service were/are obstructive.”*

*“Learning standards similar to that of primary school.”*

*“Some classes were good, others terrible!”*

### 3.6 Reasons for not completing courses

Question 12<sup>†</sup> asked respondents who started but did not complete their course to give the reasons why. As Table 6 below clearly shows, the biggest reason for respondents not completing a course was being moved to another prison (41%, 51/125), with frustration at a lack of materials/support the second largest response. These answers suggest the main barriers to prisoners completing their learning are, again systemic and practical, rather than individual and personal.

Table 6: Reasons for not completing courses		Responses	%
	I was moved to another prison	51	41%
	I got frustrated by the lack of materials/support	30	24%
	I got bored	26	21%
	I was offered other opportunities within prison which clashed	23	18%
	I was going through personal difficulties	22	18%
	I found the study too difficult	12	10%
	Other	12	10%

Other reasons given for not completing courses included; courses being discontinued, (sometimes through funding being cut), and prisoners being released. Comments included:

*“Got bullied in education and because I walked out I got nicked and punished, so I quit.”*

*“Courses restructured 3 months into a course - subject not continued under new regime.”*

*“Security closed one of the training shops.”*

*“Prison lost paperwork for qualifications.”*

<sup>9</sup> Meeting needs? The Offenders’ Learning and Skills Service.

Public Accounts Committee: Forty-seventh Report of Session 2007–08 Evidence, p.3

### 3.7 The impact of learning

Respondents were asked what impact their learning had on them (question 13<sup>†</sup>). Answers are illustrated in Table 7 below.

Table 7:	The impact of learning	Responses	%
Impact of learning	I got a qualification/accreditation/certificate	297	75%
	It boosted my self-esteem	211	53%
	It has improved my job prospects	174	44%
	It has given me an appetite for learning	160	41%
	It changed the way I see myself and my future	160	41%
	I got a kick out of getting good marks/results	137	35%
	It has been helpful in applying for recategorisation/parole	54	14%
	Other	20	5%

Three quarters of respondents stated that getting a qualification, accreditation or certificate was the biggest impact of their learning. For 53% (211/395) of respondents the impact was of a highly personal nature through a boosting of their self-esteem, with 41% (160/395) experiencing a change in the way they see themselves and their future.

A slightly higher percentage of women than men said they had gained a qualification (80%, 28/35 women, 76%, 269/353 men). A higher percentage of men (42%, 149/353) than women (31%, 11/34) felt that learning had changed the way they see themselves.

Generally speaking, older respondents got more out of learning than younger respondents. 65% (53/81) of 46-60 year olds said learning boosted their self-esteem compared to 51% (78/153) of 15-30 year olds. 52% (42/81) of 46-60 year olds said their learning experience had given them an appetite for learning, compared to 37% (56/153) of 15-30 year olds. 42% (34/81) of 46-60 year olds said they got a kick out of learning compared to 29% (44/153) of 15-30 year olds. The percentages of each age group that got a qualification, accreditation or certificate were almost the same, at 75% (114/153) of 15-30 year olds and 73% (59/81) of 46-60 year olds.

Other comments included:

*“It has a big impact on my life but I wish I could have these opportunities outside so easily.”*

*“I will set up my own business off the back of the qualifications.”*

*“Enhanced parole prospects and acquired jobs within prison.”*

*“Put on my sentence plan, so had no choice but to complete.”*

*“Staff hate me more.”*

### 3.8 Extra courses

In question 14 of the survey, respondents were asked to name up to 3 extra courses or subjects they would like to see provided in their prison. 82 different subjects were named, along with requests to offer higher level courses than those currently available. 599 suggestions for subjects were made in total.

The most popular courses cited were computing or computer related. There was a heavy emphasis on practical courses such as plumbing, electrical engineering and construction.

Table 8:  
Top 10 suggestions for extra courses or subjects

<b>Suggestion</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>%</b>
Computing	64	11%
Plumbing	37	6%
Music	28	5%
Electrical/Mechanical Engineering	28	5%
Driving	27	5%
Languages	25	4%
Construction	25	4%
Science	21	4%
Cookery	21	4%
Bricklaying	20	3%

There was very little difference between the top 10 suggestions for extra courses suggested by respondents who had achieved qualification levels of A-level or above prior to coming into prison. This group of people would prefer courses in arts and crafts subjects at the expense of bricklaying.

Music is generally one of the hardest subjects to access in prisons, yet there is evidence that music study and experience can have a significant impact on prisoners' social and behavioural skills.<sup>10</sup>

A further 18 (3%) respondents requested arts and crafts subjects, 9 (2%) requested creative writing, 12 (2%) respondents would like drama courses and 3 (1%) requested photography classes.

### 3.9 Learning support

Respondents were asked in question 15<sup>+</sup> about what support they had had whilst learning. Almost 70% (284/410) of respondents said they received support from their prison education department with 48% (197/410) receiving encouragement from their teachers/tutors. 14% (57/410) said they didn't receive any worthwhile support.

Table 9:  
Type of support received whilst learning

<b>Type of Support</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>%</b>
I was helped by people in the prison education department	284	69%
The teacher/tutors offered plenty of encouragement	197	48%
My family and friends were keen for me to learn	121	30%
I was encouraged by my fellow inmates	91	22%
I had support from a mentor/or individual tutor	74	18%
Prison officers were supportive	72	18%
I didn't really have any worthwhile support	57	14%
I had specialist support e.g. for dyslexia or other needs	14	3%
Other	27	7%

<sup>10</sup> See *Beats & Bars - Music in Prisons: An Evaluation*  
Alexandra Cox and Loraine Gelsthorpe, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, 2008



Prison officers score (18%, 72/410) slightly higher in terms of providing learning support than in terms of encouraging respondents to learn (12% as shown in Table 4), but this figure is still low.

### 3.10 Further support to make learning easier

Question 16<sup>†</sup> asked what would have made learning easier for respondents. For the majority (62%, 248/400) having access to the internet was important with almost half suggesting practical assistance in terms of more books and materials (48%, 193/400) and access to a word processor (48%, 193/400). Again, a significant number of respondents (27%, 107/400) said that staying in one prison would have helped them. Lack of ICT and internet causes significant problems, as do the basic conditions for study. 55% of women (18/33) said that having access to a quiet place for studying would make learning easier compared to 38% of men (141/367).

Table 10:  
Type of support that would make learning easier

Type of Support	Responses	%
Having access to the internet	248	62%
More books/materials being available	193	48%
Having a word processor to write essays	193	48%
If wages for learning were the same as those for working	172	43%
Having access to a quiet place for studying	159	40%
Having basic things in my cell - e.g. table and decent reading light	143	36%
Knowing what courses were available	123	31%
Staying in one prison rather than having to re-start somewhere else	107	27%
Receiving faster feedback on my assignments	82	21%
Other	42	11%

Many of the 'other' answers related to having more time to study or better conditions for learning, as highlighted by the comment:

*"Being allowed access to all of my coursework in cell."*

Other comments included:

*"More classroom time i.e. not let out late and brought back early everyday losing several hours per week."*

*"Hindered by limited PC time and not being able to use flexi learning."*

*"More support from the education department especially distance learning managers."*

*"Instead of concentrating on low end courses simply to get numbers through, courses which have real world accreditation and usefulness are needed."*

*"Anti education staff would (be) sacked and kicked out from prisons."*

*"If bullying and fights didn't happen so much in education."*

### 3.11 Individual learning plans / learning records

Respondents were asked if they had an Individual Learning Plan or Learning Record (question 17). 42% (170/406) of respondents said they did, with 58% (236/406) either not having them or being unsure if they did. This figure compares favourably with the National Audit Office's examination of

prisoners' learning records which found that there was 'no record of assessment for a quarter of prisoners', after examining a sample of prisoners' learning records.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.12 The effect of moving from another prison

Question 18<sup>+</sup> asked how a respondent's education was affected if they had moved from another prison. A significant number of respondents were prevented from continuing their learning because the course they were doing was not available at their new prison (33%, 71/214), with 26% (55/214) suffering as their education records were not transferred. Those involved in long distance learning had mixed experiences, although a higher percentage (18%, 39/214) were able to continue without problems, compared to the 8% (17/214) of respondents who could not continue as it took too long for materials to follow them to their new prison.

Table 11:  
Effects on learning of moving from another prison

Effect	Responses	%
Had to leave in the middle of course	90	42%
Had to wait for place on courses at my new prison	79	37%
Course I was doing not available at new prison	71	33%
Education records were not transferred	55	26%
Was doing distance learning, so could continue OK	39	18%
Other	28	13%
Was doing distance learning but it took too long for materials to follow me	17	8%

Other comments highlighted the difficulties in moving from one prison to another, including the following comments:

*"Exams to finish course in new prison proving problematic and frustrating."*

*"Poor communication and transfer of records."*

Although not all experiences of moving prison were negative:

*"It was OK; I was placed in full time education straight away."*

Of those respondents who were affected by moving from another prison, 10% (21/211) were female and 90% (190/211) were male. This is roughly in line with the gender breakdown of all respondents. Similarly, those affected in terms of age were largely in line with the breakdown of all respondents by age. Generally speaking, the longer a respondent had been in prison the more they were affected by moving between prisons. For example, although 39% (182/464) of all respondents had been in prison for a year or less, only 25% (52/211) of respondents who were affected by moving had been in prison for this length of time. Similarly, 36% (169/464) of all respondents had been in prison for three years or more, but 48% (102/211) of people affected by moving between prisons had served at least three years.

### 3.13 Involvement in education/learning related volunteer roles/prison jobs

Approximately 40% (190) of respondents said they had been involved in volunteer roles or prison jobs related to education and learning (question 19<sup>+</sup>). More respondents were involved in unpaid roles than paid, with some respondents involved in more than one role. Amongst the other roles mentioned were 'Listener' and helping fellow prisoners with writing and translation.

<sup>11</sup> Public Accounts Committee 'Meeting needs? The Offenders' Learning and Skills Service. Forty-seventh Report of Session. P.11

The differences in roles undertaken by men and women were minor, although 27% (4/15) of women had been paid education orderlies compared to 11% (22/192) of men. Generally the differences in roles undertaken by older and younger prisoners were minor, although older respondents (aged 46-60) were more likely to have been unpaid Toe by Toe Mentors (39%, 12/31) than respondents aged 15-30 (29%, 17/59). Toe by Toe Mentors give one-to one tuition to prisoners who struggle to read. Similarly, respondents aged 46-60 were more likely to be unpaid Peer Mentors (42%, 13/31) compared to those aged 15-30 (22%, 13/59).

Prison wages can vary between approximately £7 - £15 per week, depending on the type of work and the policy set out by the Governor of each prison.<sup>12</sup>

Table 12:  
Prison jobs and volunteer roles undertaken

Role	Paid		Unpaid	
Toe by Toe mentor	22	12%	51	27%
Peer mentor	27	14%	54	28%
Classroom assistant	48	25%	40	21%
Wing learning and skills representative	16	8%	25	13%
Education orderly	26	14%	12	6%
Other			44	23%
	<b>139</b>		<b>226</b>	

This indicates that payment is not the motivating factor for prisoners becoming mentors. Many prisoners report that, having gained from learning in prison, they want to help others.

Question 20<sup>+</sup> of the survey asked respondents if they felt they would be suitable for, and would like to do, any of the roles mentioned. 341 respondents answered this question. 80% more than had said they had been involved in some way, suggesting a significant pool of people willing to undertake both paid and unpaid roles, although respondents would be willing to take up roughly twice as many paid roles as volunteer ones.

Table 13:  
Prison jobs and volunteer roles respondents felt suitable for

Role	Paid		Unpaid	
Toe by Toe mentor	79	23%	56	16%
Peer mentor	87	26%	54	16%
Classroom assistant	123	36%	49	14%
Wing learning and skills representative	85	25%	45	13%
Education orderly	104	31%	32	9%
Other			9	3%
	<b>478</b>		<b>245</b>	

Generally, men were proportionally more willing to undertake both paid and unpaid roles than women. For example, 24% (54/221) of men were prepared to be volunteer peer mentors, compared to 5% (1/20) of women, and 45% (99/221) of men were willing to take a paid job as an education orderly compared to 25% (5/20) of women. 50% (10/20) of women were prepared to be paid wing learning and skills representatives, compared to 34% (75/221) of men, (although 20% (44/221) of men were willing to take on the role without payment, compared to just 5% (1/20) of women).

<sup>12</sup> PSO 4460 "Prisoner Pay"

There was no significant difference between younger and older respondents in terms of willingness to become either paid or unpaid mentors. 38% (40/105) of respondents aged 15-30 were willing to become paid wing learning and skills representatives, compared to 24% (10/42) of respondents aged 46-60. Similarly 15-30 year olds were more willing to be both paid (54%, 57/105) and unpaid (19%, 20/105) education orderlies than respondents aged 46-60 (paid 36%, 15/42, unpaid 5%, 2/42). Conversely, 31% (13/42) of 46-60 year olds were willing to become unpaid classroom assistants compared to 18% (19/105) of respondents aged 15-30.

### 3.14 Views on particular aspects of prison education

Respondents were asked in question 21 to give their views on four different aspects of prison education: access to courses, advice and guidance on courses, the range of courses available and information about distance learning. The results are summarised in Figures 8-11 below.

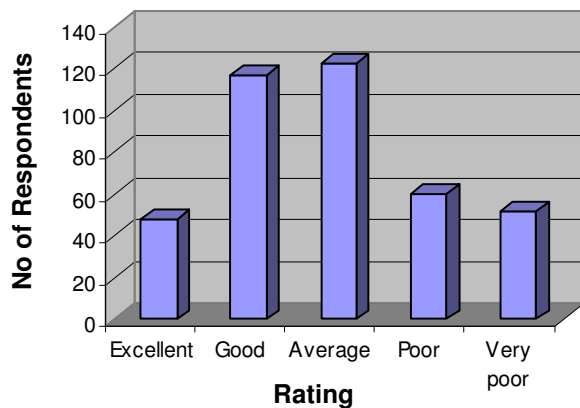


Figure 8:  
Views on Access to Courses



Figure 9:  
Views on Advice and Guidance

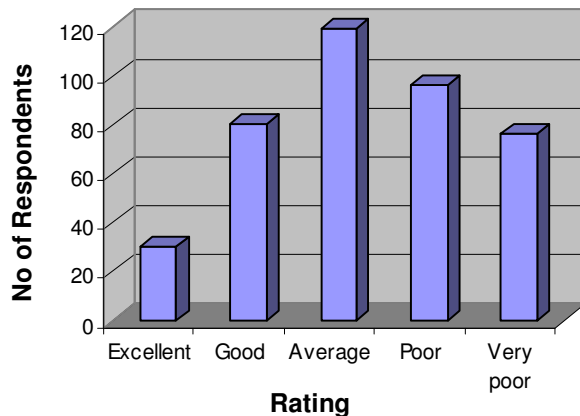


Figure 10:  
Views on Range of Courses



Figure 11:  
Views on Information about Distance Learning

28% of respondents said access to courses was either poor or very poor. 37% of respondents thought that advice and guidance on which course to choose was poor or very poor, with the percentage increasing to 43% for the range of courses on offer and 48% for distance learning.

### 3.15 Access to facilities and resources

Question 22 asked respondents if they had access to a range of educational facilities.

- 40% (117/294) said they had access to creative writing/writer in residence
- 64%(189/294) had access to art facilities
- 31% (97/314) had access to music facilities
- 28% (75/270) had access to poetry facilities
- 15% (45/298) had access to drama facilities

Respondents from Category C/D prisons had slightly more access to facilities than Category A/B prisoners, but the differences were marginal. For example, 25% of Category C/D prisoners had access to music facilities compared to 19% of Category A/B.

Of the 90 people who stated that they did not have access to creative writing/writer in residence, 37% (33/90) said they would like to have access or would use creative writing facilities.

- 40 people responded that they did not have access to art facilities, of which 35% (14/40) said they would like access or would use them
- 119 people did not have access to music facilities, of which 40% (48/119) said they would like access or would use them
- 120 people did not have access to poetry facilities, of which 27% (32/120) said they would like access or would use them
- 168 people did not have access to drama facilities, of which 31% (52/168) said they would like access or would use them.

Respondents were also asked in question 23 if they had used particular media in prison.

- 47% (160/343) of respondents had used CD ROMs
- 47% (159/338) had used DVDs
- 52% (174/338) had used cassette tapes
- 74% (271/367) had used computers
- 6% (18/317) had used the Learn Direct web site. This low percentage reflects the fact that the Learn Direct website is available at only a small number of prisons.

Again, there was very little difference between Category A/B prisoners and Category C/D prisoners in terms of who had used each type of media.

Respondents who had used the media were asked where they had used it (Table 14).

	<b>CD</b>	<b>DVD</b>	<b>Cassettes</b>	<b>Computers</b>	<b>Learn Direct site</b>
Education	93%	51%	25%	90%	82%
Wing	22%	64%	89%	7%	9%
Library	21%	17%	22%	22%	9%
Other	15%	28%	15%	9%	18%

Table 14:  
Where  
media has  
been used

### **3.16 Education plans or hopes after release**

Respondents were asked in question 24<sup>†</sup> what their plans or hopes were with regards to education after release. 50% (196/396) of respondents were aiming to find a way to continue training as well as working, with 30% (117/396) wanting to carry on academic study either part-time or full-time. A relatively high proportion of respondents (16%, 64/396) said they were aiming at university. However, a third of respondents said they would not be continuing studies on release as their priority would be getting a job.

Women (59%, 19/32) said they were more inclined to look for a way to continue training as well as working than men (43%, 177/414).

Other comments included:

*“Wish I could get out with construction NVQ so I could get job.”*

*“Would love an apprenticeship scheme or Princes Trust Opportunity.”*

*“Job is number one priority; retrain if necessary to get on.”*

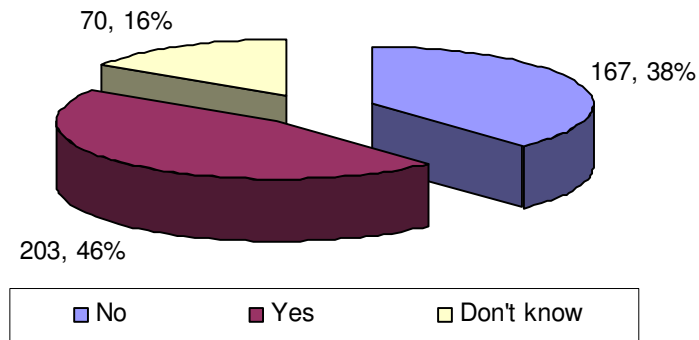
*“Can't work due to mental health illness.”*

## 4 Plans and Prospects on Release

### 4.1 The impact of prison

Question 25 asked respondents to say whether prison had helped them towards leading a law abiding and useful life upon release. 46% (203/440) of respondents said it had, with 38% (167/440) saying it had not and 16% (70/440) being unsure.

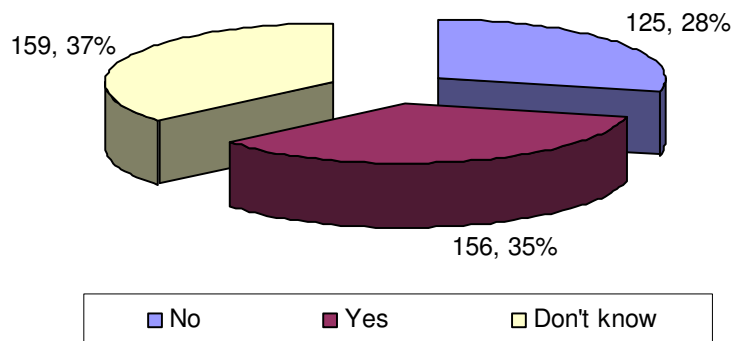
Figure 12:  
Has prison helped you towards leading a law abiding and useful life upon release?



### 4.2 Pre-release courses and resettlement wing / programme

Respondents were asked if their prison offers pre-release courses or has a resettlement wing or programme (question 26). 440 people answered this question. 35% (156/440) of respondents said that it did, with 28% (125/440) saying it did not. 37% (159/440) of respondents were unsure which suggests that there is some scope for prisons with such programmes to better inform inmates about them. A small number of respondents to the earlier question about extra courses they would like to see provided suggested resettlement courses.

Figure 13:  
Does your prison offer pre-release courses or have a resettlement wing/programme?



### 4.3 Employment status on release

In question 27, respondents were asked what they expected their employment status to be on release. Of the 436 people who answered this question:

- 41% (178/436) thought they would be employed with a 28% (120/436) stating they would be self employed
- A significant proportion (30%, 132/436) said they would be claiming unemployment benefit with 11% stating they would be claiming a disability benefit
- 6% (28/436) would be retired

There was no indication within the question as to whether respondents were being asked to say if they would be employed immediately on release or after a period of time.

There were no significant differences in responses to this question by respondents who had gained a qualification, accreditation or certificate in prison. Respondents felt they were marginally less likely to claim unemployment benefit (27% compared to an average of 30% for all respondents).

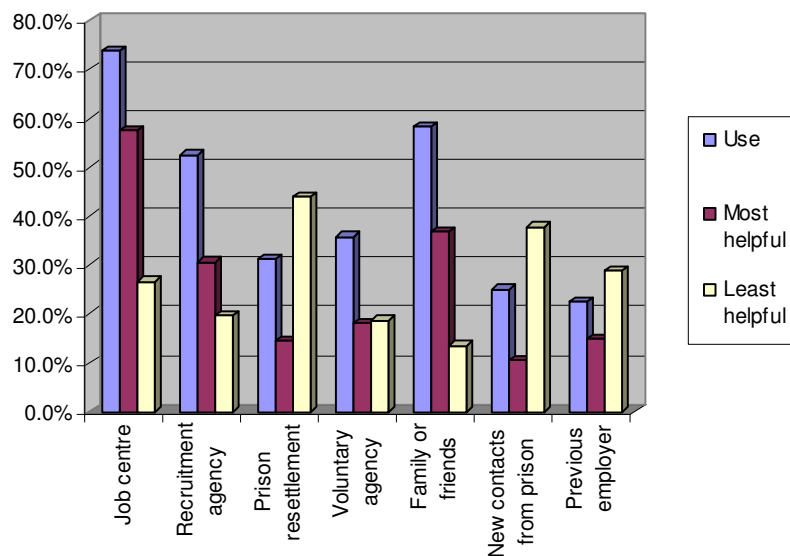
54% (93/173) of respondents aged 15-30 thought they would be employed upon release compared to 28% (25/89) of respondents aged 46-50. However, 35% (31/89) of respondents aged 46-50 thought they would be self-employed compared to only 20% (35/173) of 15-30 year olds.

#### 4.4 Sources of help in finding employment

Respondents who would be looking for work upon release were asked to indicate which potential sources of help they planned to use (question 28<sup>+</sup>). Almost three quarters (309/419) of respondents said they would use the Job Centre, with 58% (244/419) using family or friends and 53% (220/419) using recruitment agencies. Only 31% (131/419) said they would use the prison resettlement programme.

Respondents were also asked to say which two of the options would be most useful (question 28a) and which two would be least helpful (question 28b). Responses to these questions supported the findings from the previous question with Job Centres (58%, 227/395), family or friends (37%, 145/395) and recruitment agencies (31%, 121/395) being seen as the most helpful, whilst prison resettlement (44%, 171/389) and new contacts from prison (38%, 147/389) were seen as least helpful.

Figure 14:  
Sources of help in finding employment



#### 4.5 Obstacles to gaining work on release

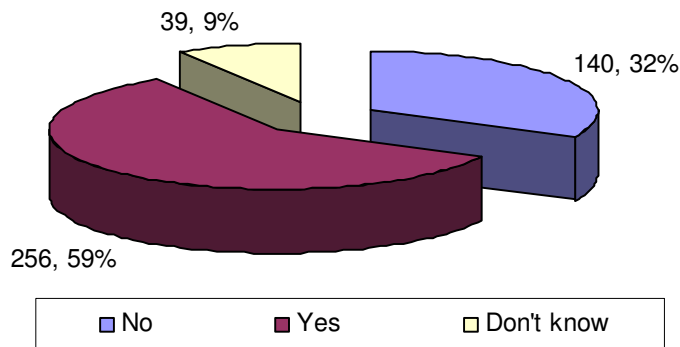
Question 29<sup>+</sup> asked about perceived obstacles to gaining work on release. Of the 402 people who answered this question, 87% (348/402) agreed that 'few employers recruit ex-offenders'. Less than a quarter thought the obstacle was themselves with only 23% (91/402) thinking their lack of work related skills would be a hindrance. Only 18% (74/402) thought their own lack of confidence in approaching employers would be a factor.



#### 4.6 Skills acquired in prison

Respondents were asked whether they had acquired any skills whilst in prison that would help them find legitimate employment upon release (question 30). 59% (256/435) of people who answered the question felt they had, with 32% (140/435) saying no and 9% (39/435) unsure.

Figure 15:  
During your time in prison have you acquired any skills that will help you find legitimate employment upon release?



#### 4.7 Possible ways of assisting prisoners to improve job prospects

Question 31<sup>+</sup> looked at possible options of help in improving respondent's job prospects after release. 427 people answered this question with the top three responses being:

- having access or more access to the internet/newspapers etc (61%, 260/427)
- making contact with employers before release (59%, 251/427)
- gaining work related skills qualifications (54%, 232/427)

Achieving basic skills qualifications received the lowest response, with only 25% (107/427) of respondents believing this would help improve their job prospects.<sup>13</sup>

Generally speaking, younger respondents felt different forms of assistance were more likely to improve their prospects of gaining employment than older respondents. For example, 32% (57/180) of 15-30 year olds felt that achieving basic skills qualifications would help them, compared to 16% (13/82) of 46-50 year olds. Similarly, 43% (77/180) of 15-30 year olds said that having a prison job similar to the employment they wanted would assist them, compared to 33% (27/82) of 46-60 year olds. However, one area all respondents viewed as important was more access to the internet/newspapers, with results of 59% from both age categories.

#### 4.8 Perceptions of time needed to get a job on release

Respondents were asked in question 32 how long they thought it would take them to get a job after they were released. 394 people answered this question, of which 17% (67/394) felt they would never get a job. However, two thirds (264/394) thought they would get a job within six months.

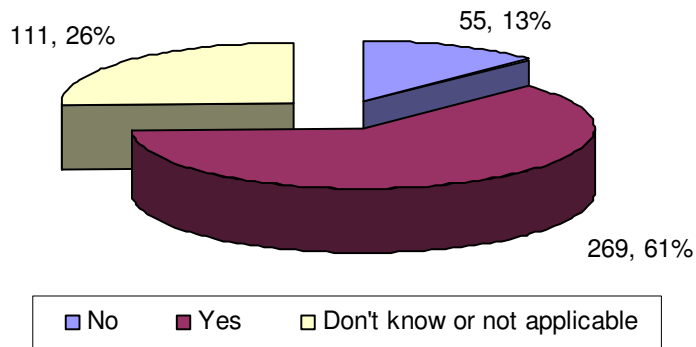
34% (54/160) of 15-30 year olds thought they would get a job within the first 3 months after their release compared to 25% (20/179) of 46-60 year olds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the percentage of 46-60 year olds who felt they would never get a job (29%, 23/79) was significantly higher than 15-30 year olds (12%, 19/160).

<sup>13</sup> This can usefully be read in the context of current Government priorities for prison education, as expressed in its policy paper 'Reducing Re-offending through Skills and Employment' and its successor document detailing next steps. Both documents stress the crucial importance of enabling prisoners to acquire skills and qualifications to enhance their employability.

#### 4.9 Desire to continue learning or training after release

61% (269/435) of respondents said yes when asked if they would like, after release, to continue any learning or skills training they had started (question 33). 26% (111/435) said no, with 13% (55/435) unsure. This is broadly consistent with the findings to the earlier question about plans and hopes with regard to education after release, where a third of respondents said they did not have any plans to continue their education due to prioritising finding a job.

Figure 16:  
If you have started any learning or skills training whilst in prison, would you like to continue this after release?



## **5 Conclusion and next steps**

### **5.1 An agenda for the Prisoners Education Trust's future work**

This report provides a rich source of data covering many of the key issues which arise in relation to offender learning. It complements other reports, but has a uniqueness because its content derives entirely from prisoners themselves.

Prisoners Education Trust, through its *Offender Learning Matters* project in particular, plans to use this data in a range of ways over the coming years. These findings will underpin our policy positions and will be used in our briefings for politicians and policy-makers on specific issues. They will also help us communicate a fuller and more detailed account of what is happening when we are talking with journalists, prison staff, and many other interested parties. And they will help us identify areas for further research. Above all, we would like to see broader debate about what needs to happen to improve prisoner learning.

To encourage debate, we are gathering a range of comments and recommendations in response to the survey findings from experts and others engaged in or concerned about prisoners' learning. The first of these comments, from one of our trustees, Peter Honey, is below as an endpiece. Others will be published separately on our website, [www.prisonerseducation.org.uk](http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk) over the coming months.

### **5.2 Endpiece**

By Dr Peter Honey, Trustee of Prisoners Education Trust and Management Consultant.

Viewed from the perspective of the Trust's vision, namely that every prisoner has the opportunity to benefit from education, and the Trust's core belief that education improves self-esteem and enables prisoners to choose a more constructive way of life, the results of this survey are encouraging. Even allowing for self selection (prisoners actively participating in education and training were always more likely to respond to the survey), it is heartening to see so many reporting favourably on the impact of their learning.

An overwhelming number of respondents, including 33% doing distance learning, are positive about their educational activities finding them 'useful and worthwhile' and a constructive way to use their time. Not only are respondents gaining qualifications, which they have every reason to hope will improve their prospects of finding worthwhile employment on release, they also report that their self-esteem has been boosted and an appetite for learning stimulated. Music to the ears of the Trust!

It is also gratifying to see personnel working in over-stretched prison education departments, in a very real sense our 'partners', getting accolades for the support they provide. Our own internal surveys have consistently shown the vital part they play in encouraging prisoners to apply to the Trust for distance learning courses, thus opening up learning opportunities that would not otherwise be available.

That's the good news. There are, however, some gloomier findings. The reasons given for not participating in learning, admittedly by a minority of respondents, are concerning. We hear about 'not being allowed' to start a course, a lack of advice and guidance, nothing being available 'at my level' and of the disruption caused by being moved on to another prison. We learn too of other frustrations such as not having access to a quiet place for studying, difficulties in getting books and materials – even a lack of basic things such as a table or decent reading lamp. These are unhelpful obstacles to learning. One can only admire the tenacity of prisoners who keep going despite practical difficulties such as these. Even more serious, especially for distance learners, is not having access to the internet or a word processor to write essays. Increasingly, distance learning providers assume that students have these basic tools. The survey confirms that finding a safe way for prisoner learners to access the internet is an important priority.

The report points out that the main barriers to prisoners accessing learning in prisons (I prefer to think of them as challenging but surmountable obstacles, rather than barriers) appear to be systemic and practical rather than personal. I would only comment that blaming external circumstances, particularly if they fall into the category of being 'beyond my control', is far easier than admitting to any personal frailty or to a lack of personal motivation. This does not, however, in any way detract from the importance of improving the lot of prisoner learners. We must do everything we can to make learning seem an attractive option to more prisoners. The motivation to learn will surely follow.

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