

Written evidence submitted by the Prisoners' Education Trust (PRI0044)

1) About Prisoners' Education Trust

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) offers distance learning courses, advice and guidance to people in prison and uses policy and advocacy work to improve prison education and show policymakers and the public the impact that education can have for people in prison. We offer 125 different courses – including GCSEs and A-levels, Open University Access modules and a wide range of professional courses – and enable 1,500 people each year to access distance learning, giving them the skills to build brighter futures. Analysis by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab shows that people supported by PET to study distance learning courses in prison are more likely to get a job after release and less likely to reoffend.

2) Introduction

PET welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry. Enabling people in prison to access education that meets their needs is key to rehabilitation, increasing the likelihood that they will secure employment on release, reducing the chance that they will reoffend, and improving wellbeing. While the delivery of the majority of education in prison is primarily the responsibility of specialist external providers, there is an important role for prison officers to play in supporting and enabling this. Without the active involvement and engagement of prison officers, prison education simply cannot be delivered effectively. Despite the best efforts of all involved, current officer shortages are therefore having a significant impact on the delivery of prison education, compromising the ability of prisons to deliver effective rehabilitation.

3) The role of education in prison

Education in prison gives individuals the skills they need to unlock their potential, gain employment and become assets to their communities. It also builds social capital and improves the wellbeing of prisoners, both during their sentences and once released. Education is the engine of rehabilitation and can make a real and substantial difference, providing people with skills, qualifications and attributes that will help them on release.

The availability of education in prison is particularly important because of the prior educational attainment of people in prison. The latest prison education statistics published by the Ministry of Justice show that in the year to March 2022, 66% of maths and 61% of English initial assessment outcomes were at Entry Levels 1-3.¹ This shows that levels of literacy and numeracy among prisoners are significantly lower than for the general population. 27% of prisoners who took an initial assessment had a learning difficulty or disability.

There is a wealth of evidence that demonstrates the benefits of prison education, particularly in relation to its impact on reoffending and employment post-release.² Research carried out on behalf of the Ministry of Justice regarding prison learners, for example, showed that they were significantly more likely to be in employment than non-learners one year from

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2021-2022>

² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0264550517699290>

release. It also found that people who had participated in education in prison were significantly less likely to reoffend within 12 months of release.³ These findings are reinforced by the most comprehensive international study, published by the RAND Corporation, which found that prison education reduces the risk of reoffending by 13%.⁴

The impact of PET's work to enable people in prison to participate in distance learning has also been assessed by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab. This showed that the people supported by PET are more likely to get a job within one year of release and are less likely to reoffend within one year of release than prisoners who PET does not support.⁵

4) Response to the inquiry's Terms of Reference

What implications do difficulties in recruiting and retaining OSGs and prison officers have for the ability to provide effective regimes for prisoners?

Restrictions in prison regimes are not a new problem. Even before the Covid lockdown, some prisons had been running restricted regimes. This could mean, for example, that people were unlocked for activities during either the morning or the afternoon but not both; it could also mean wings had access to education on a rota system on different weeks. During Covid-19 significant new restrictions were introduced to protect the health of prisoners and staff. Prisoners frequently spent 23 hours a day or more in their cells and access to education departments was largely non-existent.

However, while nationally mandated restrictions related to Covid-19 were lifted in May 2022, prisons have not yet been able to run full regimes. This has had a significant impact on prison education. As HM Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills said in her annual report for 2021-22, "the pandemic had a chilling effect on prison education and the thaw is yet to come".⁶ The current shortage of prison officers has played a significant role in this, as the availability and engagement of prison officers is key to the delivery of education.

Firstly, shortages of officers means that prisoners cannot always be escorted safely around the prison or moved from their wing to their allocated activity. Given that the delivery of the majority of prison education and training depends on access to classrooms and workshops, if prisoners cannot get to them then activities cannot go ahead. Even when prisoners can get to classrooms, staff shortages may lead to them arriving late or needing to return to their wing early. This disrupts the planned lessons and puts more pressure on prison teachers. Staff shortages can also affect prison libraries, which can be closed with little or no notice because there are no staff to oversee access.

Inspection reports from HM Inspectorate of Prisons routinely highlight the impact of staff shortages on regimes and the provision of education in prison. For example, the recent

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708156/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initial-impacts-report.pdf

⁴ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html

⁵ <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/2021/01/government-research-impact-of-prison-education-goes-beyond-finding-work/>

⁶ p.12: Ofsted (2022) *The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2021/22*.

inspection report on HMP/YOI Norwich noted that “a severe shortage of prison officers...had recently led to leaders introducing a very limited regime” and goes on to say that because of this “prisoners had a very reduced amount of education, skills and work activity”.⁷ The review of progress at HMP Winchester published in January 2023 similarly states that “restrictions on the regime caused by severe staff shortages and a lack of instructors had a detrimental impact on the breadth of education and work available to prisoners, and on the frequency at which activities were available”.⁸

Secondly, with current staff shortages officers have less time to spend with individual prisoners. This also has an impact on education. If they have the time to do so, prison officers can encourage prisoners to engage with education, help them to recognise how education might help them to use their time in prison productively and achieve their goals, and support them as learners. Current staffing levels make this extremely difficult for officers to do.

Support from prison officers may be particularly important for prisoners who are doing distance learning courses. Distance learning provides opportunities for people in prison to access courses in subjects and at levels that would otherwise be unavailable to them. It provides opportunities for progression that are too often not otherwise available. It also enables prisoners to make better and more productive use of the time that they spend in their cell.

However, by its nature completing distance learning requires self-discipline and motivation – prisoners have to complete work without close supervision or support and often with limited access to a tutor. While officers should not be expected to be specialist tutors, simply showing an interest in what a learner is doing and the progress that they are making can help with motivation. Officers can also help to solve practical problems that learners may encounter with their course and offer encouragement and support, making it more likely that they will successfully complete their course.

In addition, officers can inform people in prison about the distance learning opportunities that may be available to them, if they are not aware of what PET, the Open University and other providers can offer. All of this will only be possible, however, if there is enough capacity in the prison workforce for officers to spend time providing this additional support and advice to prisoners.

How effective is the initial training, professional supervision, and continuous professional development provided to prison staff?

Given the key role that prison staff can play in facilitating access to education and supporting learners, PET strongly supports the Ministry of Justice’s commitment in their *Prisons Strategy White Paper* to “give our staff the training and tools they need to provide a regime which is tailored to the needs of the prisoners with whom they work”.⁹ It is essential that this includes ensuring that all prison officers understand the important role that education can

⁷ <https://www.justiceinspectores.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/12/Norwich-web-2022pdf.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.justiceinspectores.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2023/01/Winchester-IRP-web-2022.pdf>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1038765/prison-strategy-white-paper.pdf

play in rehabilitation, are aware of the educational provision available to prisoners, and know what they can do to support learners in their prison.

The Ministry of Justice has already acknowledged this, accepting the recommendation of the Education Select Committee, in the report of its inquiry into prison education, that “prison officers should also receive training to ensure that they understand the importance of education in supporting prisoners to find employment and reducing reoffending, so they develop a positive attitude towards the role that education has to play in prisons”.¹⁰

The apprenticeship programme for prison officers is an opportunity to ensure new officers develop an understanding of the benefits of prison education, while it is important that initial and ongoing training for prison officers contains information on the value of prison education and, crucially, what prison officers can do to support prisoners to participate in education. We are pleased that the Ministry of Justice recognises this and is working to ensure that education is part of the training provided to all officers. This inquiry may want to consider what progress is being made towards delivering this.

5) Conclusion

Education should be at the heart of rehabilitation in prisons – evidence shows that participating in education both reduces reoffending and increases employment among prison leavers. However, good quality education can only be delivered in prison with the active support of prison officers. There needs to be enough officers to run a full regime, enabling prisoners to access education departments, and prison officers need to have enough time to work with individual prisoners and the skills and knowledge to support them to participate in education. This can only be achieved by increasing officer recruitment and retention and improving the training that all officers receive on prison education.

January 2023

¹⁰ p.13: House of Commons Education Committee (2022) *Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity, First Report of Session 2022-23*.