

Written evidence submitted by DWRM (Doing What Really Matters)

Education – are prisoners being left behind

Consultation response from DWRM Consultants.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/817/education-are-prisoners-being-left-behind/>

DWRM (Doing What Really Matters) is a social enterprise led by Ruth McFarlane, an expert in prison education, and Daniel Whyte, who has studied both his undergraduate and his Master's degree while in prison and is now studying his PhD in criminology at Westminster University. Ruth's background is in teaching in prisons and working with people excluded from mainstream education. Dan has held multiple roles facilitating education provision within prison and university settings.

We offer our written submissions addressing the following areas:

- What is the purpose of education in prisons?

Our personal experience tells us that education in prisons has a multi-faceted purpose. Firstly, for those who missed out on their learning at school, this offers an opportunity to address that and to catch up with their peers. For those who have gaps in their learning it is a chance to fill in those gaps. In a weird way, learning in prison can work in a way that learning in school did not. The prison environment, where you are surrounded by like-minded individuals, means that the fear of being bullied for not being on a par with your peers is gone. People who did not learn to read and have hidden it all their lives can open up and ask for help. It reduces the bravado that is often witnessed in school classrooms and is the cause of many school exclusions.

One major element is the fact that prison is full of people who are anti authority and who do not like following the rules. Often they did not go to school because they did not like being told what they had to do. In prison, when you can choose to learn, in a place where all your other choices have been taken away, this is profound. It's a trick of the mind. People who would not want to learn in any other setting want to learn in prison because you can choose to do this instead of working. We would like to see greater recognition of this.

Education offers the opportunity to change your life. People who study at a higher level often become the trusted prisoners who contribute to a settled environment and use their study experiences to guide others of a lower academic ability into educational pathways. They act as role models and take on formal mentoring within educational departments and vocational skills workshops.

Prisoners that study at a higher-level are also better placed to constructively and proactively participate in the committees and prisoner / student councils that tackle issues relating to the running of prisons.

The opportunity to study also contributes to a sense of wellbeing that cannot otherwise be easily met within the confines of a prison regime. It brings a sense of purpose and hope as well as offering a realistic pathway towards living a different life on release. Studying for a degree is a long-term commitment that not only helps the person while they are in prison, but also encourages positive behaviour that can over-ride many years of an ingrained criminal lifestyle.

- What data exist to demonstrate the effectiveness of education and training in prisons and on prisoner attainment, and what international comparisons are available?

In terms of basic education – extensive work has been done on this (see the Coates Review for example) to show the benefits at this level. There is much less evidence relating to the effectiveness of Higher Education (HE). It is patchy, although anecdotally we know that there is potential for people in prison to have much higher employment aspirations, as a result of achieving HE qualifications, which in turn leads to a significant reduction in reoffending rates (Justice Data Lab, 2019).

Research does not usually focus on the specific post-release benefits of education, but instead looks at the numbers of people completing certain qualifications while they are in prison. In order to fully understand the effectiveness of education, which we are convinced of, we need some better data on qualitative, experiential outcomes.

Our European counterparts are much more effective in their use of education in prison – eg Norway, Holland, and we could learn a lot from adopting their good practice.

- How well are additional learning needs met by the prison education and youth custody systems, including SEND and language and communication needs?

Every education provider includes the relevant tools for assessment and identification of additional learning needs but the actual provision of support within education departments is lacking due to budget cuts and lack of resources. Even simple resources such as coloured overlays etc are often lacking. In our experience of offering learning support in many prisons, we have been required to do what we can to support students with additional needs with minimal and often makeshift resources. Departments tend to cater for what the majority of students need and are not able to buy additional specialist materials for a small number of people.

- Does education in prisons deliver the skills needed by employers, and what more can be done to better align these?

Michael Gove's focus on basic education was intended to ensure that people leaving prison had the minimum requirements for low paid jobs. This covers the whole spectrum of people leaving prison and should enable people to get a low paid job. But this does not take into account the wide range of ability of people in prison and it limits their prospects on release to a basic low-paid job. It does not encourage aspirational thinking or do anything to change the media portrayal of prisoners. This does not motivate people to achieve higher goals, and it relies on individuals to forge their own pathway.

Listening to employers about what they need from their workforce and tailoring education to match this would improve the situation, as would working with companies (like ours) who understand motivations to study. Promoting the voice of prisoners, listening to their realistic ambitions is also a key requirement.

We believe there is also a need to change the perception of deserving / undeserving people within the CJS. Many professionals working in the CJS do not encourage people to have high ambitions and when people are released, the stigma associated with a prison sentence always over-rides the potential for that person to contribute as an active citizen.

Cohen's "deviancy amplification spiral" leads to knee jerk reaction from policy makers based on outcry from the media. If policy makers are willing to make bold decisions and to promote success stories, we believe this spiral can be reversed.

- How can successful participation in education be incentivised in prisons?

Education is its own incentive, if prisoners feel they are going to be appropriately supported and if they are willing to address the causes of their offending behaviour. The incentive for education should be knowing that a person can achieve their goals and push through the barriers

It is a personal incentive, but we recognise that this is a mature outlook.

Every prisoner has a sentence plan, with an achievement and rewards plan sitting alongside it. At every stage, when a target is achieved, there should be some kind of reward to recognise progress along the path. This reward might take the form of a small monetised payment to canteen, extra gym sessions, or even time off your sentence (as is done in the US).

- How might apprenticeships work for those in custody?

This option to "earn while you learn" is highly suited to people leaving prison and we are keen to promote this progressive opportunity. We know that there are both employers and universities interested in offering Apprenticeships to people in open prisons, but that the current restrictions on employment contracts for people on ROTL mean that this is not available. We hope that this policy will be reviewed. People could start the study element of an apprenticeship while they are still in closed conditions and then move to the employment and training element when they are in open conditions, with a guaranteed job on release. This would make a huge difference to people's release plans and prospects and there are many employers willing to support this route.

- Are current resources for prison learning meeting need?

No. The Covid situation means this is a resounding no. If the prison service had kept up to date with digital connectivity within prisons, then education provision could have been adapted in the way it has been in schools and universities. The appropriate technology already exists for this to happen, but the risk averse approach of HMPPS means that access to education across the estate is hugely varied and depends on the initiative of individual prison governors. We know that the Purple Visits secure video call technology is now available in over 80 prisons – an impressive rate of adoption for any organisation, let alone the risk averse prison estate. And while there are still some issues relating to the video experience, and of course no suggestion that video calls should be offered instead of actual visits on a long-term basis, it is hoped that this option will enable more opportunity for this important contact to be maintained. The use of video calls also offers the potential for professional contact with people in prison, (although this is not being prioritised while family visits are suspended) and this opens up the possibility of delivering tutorial support for people studying higher education courses in prison. Similarly, a more rapid adoption of secure in-cell devices, which have already been tried and tested would enable much more learning to happen. There are numerous reports on the advantages of this digital approach and examples of successful adoption both in the UK and overseas. We hope that HMPPS will start to respond to this call.

- How does the variability in the prison estate and infrastructure impact on learning?

If you are in a newer prison, you will benefit from the facilities which support digital access etc. The impact on prisoners is huge, especially in the field of Higher Education. If you move to an older

prison during your studies, this can prohibit your progress and even curtail your studies. All prisons should be equipped to enable study across all educational levels. Moves should take into account what resources a person requires to continue their studies or to complete education detailed on their sentence plan.

Our personal experience is an example of this. It took Dan 7 years to complete his undergrad degree and 5 years to complete his Master's because he was moved to prisons which did not support his studies and he lost a whole year. For some people, this interruption will be permanent and they will lose the motivation to continue.

- How does provision compare in public sector and privately run prisons?

Private sector prisons tend to be much better equipped with in cell technology, and have better facilities. Being newer prisons means they have the better design and better facilities.

However staff in the private sector prisons do not have the same training and experience as those in public sector and this can also have an impact on the prisoner's experience.

- How effective and flexible is prison education and training in dealing with different lengths of sentences and the movement of prisoners across the estate?

As a whole it is quite effective in dealing with different sentence lengths because they have always done this. Movement across the estate depends on what level of education the person is at. Changing education providers, encountering different levels of support and different resources usually means that you have to start a course again or curtail your studies. Different providers have different ways of delivering education and their initial assessments often diagnose different levels of achievement. This inconsistency leads to lots of unnecessary repetition.

Participating in higher-level study offers recognised benefits both for the student and the prison and has been proven to reduce reoffending. However, prisoners are restricted from applying for student loans until they are within six years of release. Allowing prisoners to commence their studies earlier in a long sentence could increase student numbers by about 200 per year. This would cost an additional £2 million in upfront student loans, but could also save between £3 million and £6 million as a result of reduced reoffending rates. What is needed is an amendment to the Student Support Regulations for both England and Wales. The current policies state that:

to be eligible for student support the prisoner is someone whose earliest release date is within 6 years of the first day of the first academic year of the current course or current part-time course.

We believe the simple change of excluding this clause from the regulations would have a significant positive impact on the life chances of many prisoners and bring social benefits to wider society, as well as cost savings to the prison system.

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