

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** Unlocked Graduates emerged as an idea from the Coates Review of Prison Education. Our founder Natasha Porter was on the Review panel focusing on the workforce question when she had a critical realisation. Even if prisons fixed all of the problems that the panel found in prison classrooms, they would still not make a difference to the educational opportunities of most prisoners, and in particular the most vulnerable and difficult prisoners.
- 1.2** This is because in many prisons, the majority of prisoners never make it to education. They never go through the series of physical and metaphorical locked doors to spend time with a teacher. If they ever do reach a teacher, it is because someone has managed to encourage them to attend education. The regime in many prisons is such that, often, the only professional who consistently reaches prisoners is the prison officer. To put education at the heart of prisons, it is essential to invest in this workforce and get them to invest in education.
- 1.3** As you reconsider the challenges of education in prisons, you will no doubt hear from a brilliant range of experts on the issues facing prison educators and the potential solutions to make prison education more meaningful and useful. As a charity that exists to break cycles of reoffending by recruiting and training prison officers, we did not want to comment directly on these questions but did want to underscore this lesson of the Coates Review that led to our creation.
- 1.4** In assessing ideas about education in prisons, we hope you will factor in the unique operational and structural challenges created by the prison regime. Education is only one aspect of their work. To ensure that education is at the heart of prisons, operational prison staff have to prioritise it. This means that the frontline prison workforce need to be considered as critical partners in the entire educational journey for prisoners.

2. ABOUT UNLOCKED GRADUATES

- 2.1** Unlocked believes that the way you change prisons and break cycles of reoffending is through prison officers. The prison officer is the only professional who reaches every single prisoner including the most vulnerable and challenging. They set the culture on the landings and have the power to create a safe and secure environment that is focused on rehabilitation. This access and influence make it a singularly powerful role.
- 2.2** Our leadership development programme for the prison service is based on the Teach First model of system improvement. We attract top graduates into prisons to work as frontline prison officers for two years while they learn transferable leadership skills and delve into evidence-based solutions to the problems facing prisons.
- 2.3** Our participants are supported to focus on rehabilitation and breaking cycles of reoffending through a rigorous programme of training and mentoring. This work forms part of their studies for a Master's degree, which they complete while taking on the full duties of a frontline prison officer. It is a model we know can work to improve public services. Research on the Teach First scheme credited their work for a measurable improvement in London schools.

3. EARLY IMPACT

- 3.1 We know it is possible to attract high-achieving graduates to work in this critical role.** Our programme has been running for over four years now and as our fourth cohort started in September, we had placed 380 Unlocked graduates in over 25 prisons across the country.
- 3.2** Our recruitment campaign has raised the prestige of the profession on campus. For the first time, the prison officer role is represented among the Times Top 100 Graduate Employers after we became the highest new entrant in 2019. This is a huge step forward for attracting graduates into the prison service. Our participants attended 59 different universities. Over half are from the highly selective Russell Group of universities.
- 3.3** This year saw record-breaking number of applications for our 2021 entry. We were forced to close our recruitment process early after receiving over 20 applications for every place we had on offer.
- 3.4 We know our officers are high performing.** Our participants have received numerous accolades and early promotions. During their two years on the programme, nearly half of Unlocked participants (45%) took on additional responsibilities or were promoted. These responsibilities include hostage negotiation, mental health training, offender management and diversity.
- 3.5** Our participants have written policy papers and dissertations on numerous topics – from re-employment after prison, to mental health and the management of prison officers.
- 3.6** Work by our participants has led to the creation of new rehabilitation activities in HMPs Isis and Bullingdon, a prisoner-run TV channel in HMP Coldingley and new training for prison officers on addiction in HMP Hindley, among much else.

4. THE ROLE OF THE PRISON OFFICER IN EDUCATION

4.1 Unlocked Graduates evolved out of the Coates' Review and the core principle of putting education at the heart of the prison. We sought to develop a training programme which would accelerate participants to rapidly emulate the best prison officers. We were inspired by those prison officers who already take an active role in supporting prisoners in all parts of their rehabilitation, including in education. With this in mind, we refer here generically to prison officers, except where citing specific case studies of Unlocked programme participants.

4.2 Getting prisoners to education: Perhaps the most obvious way that prison officers can and do support prisoners' education is by actively encouraging them to develop their interests, as well as to consider opting-in to opportunities to develop and attend formal education. As with the best teachers, this is often about getting to know prisoners better. In a prison this might be through conversations during association time, from clues in their cells, or through the key worker sessions which prison officers have with prisoners. When prison officers understand what the prisoners in their care are interested in and enjoy, as well as which education opportunities in the prison they might be interested in, they can then signpost relevant activities. This can be by persuading them to engage in educational opportunities in the prison, or connecting them with third party organisations offering educational resources to prisoners. Prison officers are often the best placed (and indeed only) staff who have the chance to spot these potentially pivotal moments and point prisoners to them in a timely way.

4.3 Building confidence: Many prisoners have had a highly negative experience of school and formal education, and are unwilling to even consider learning in a classroom setting. Officers are in the best position to slowly build the confidence of prisoners and suggest that this might be an option for them. Pushing prisoners straight to a classroom is often not the starting point, especially if their own experiences of school were negative. The starting point is finding the hook which makes learning interesting – for work on release, self-betterment, or even a hobby to pass the time. From the perspective of a prison officer, this might be about noticing and praising a capability with numbers; encouraging pursuit of a hobby and noting its potential professional applications; or perhaps supporting a prisoner with very basic reading of a letter from home, and pointing out the advantages of improving their literacy. For many prisoners there will need to be a long journey of education before they are able to sit in a classroom and be ready to learn, and the person best placed to support them through that journey is the prison officer.

4.4 Expanding the space for learning by using time behind the cell door: Education in prison should not begin and end in classrooms. At the very least prison officers can expand the impact of formal prison education by supporting prisoners with homework, encouraging them to think about what they learned and applying it immediately. The potential for using time behind the cell door more productively has also been thrown into sharp relief by the necessity of the COVID-19 lockdown. Limited resources mean that self-driven learning with technological support in cells is likely the most cost-effective way to expand access to education in prison.

At the same time, we know that distance learning is especially challenging for learners with a lower starting point of educational attainment. They need more support and prison officers are perfectly placed to give that.

4.5 Many prison officers are already doing all this and more to support education in their establishment. The question then becomes **how to expand this good practice and support all prison officers to take an active role in education**. Drawing both on the training that we have developed and offer to our participants, as well as what we have seen in establishments across the country, we would suggest that the following approaches would be particularly important:

- Prison officers need training to ensure they are equipped with an understanding both of the importance of education and their role in supporting it, as well as the current, practical details of opportunities available in their establishment.
- This should include basic factual information about the prisoner cohort. There is a well-established evidence base of the entrenched issues which make education challenging for this cohort, including a history of exclusion, high levels of dyslexia and other learning disabilities, as well as low standards of English and maths across the board. Too often prison officers do not have an understanding of these fundamental issues.
- Any expansion in self-directed learning that happens in cells should place prison officers at its heart, building their capacity and capability to support, incentivise and facilitate prisoners to get the most out of any new resources.
- In our experience, the still relatively new keyworking support model (OMiC) provided a dedicated space for officers to consider the educational needs of prisoners. This model should be formalised with signposting to educational activities, formal or otherwise, considered an essential action in keyworker support.

5. PRISON OFFICERS IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES FROM THE UNLOCKED PROGRAMME

- 5.1** We know that empowering prison officers to take an active role in education works. We have seen many examples of participants on the Unlocked programme finding ways to directly or indirectly support the education of the prisoners in their care. We have included some examples here.
- 5.2** An Unlocked participant who is working as a prison officer at HMP Wandsworth is also a qualified ESOL teacher. She realised that many of the men on her wing struggled with English, so she started running informal ESOL sessions. She was aware that the prison did not always have enough places in formal lessons, and that many prisoners were not choosing to opt into them, so this was a way to make time on the wing more productive and purposeful.
- 5.3** During the COVID-19 lockdown many prison officers sought out content like puzzles and other distractions that could be done behind cell doors. In Feltham, one of our participants took this further. He set Maths homework and incentivised one particular young person who he thought had potential to complete it and let him mark it. As other boys saw this in action they also wanted to get involved and began completing these educational worksheets and getting them marked. At least one of these young men is now aiming to complete his Maths GCSE.
- 5.4** More generally, we constantly hear of participants on the Unlocked programme offering informal coaching to support work that is happening in prison classrooms. This has included informal encouragement (for example giving prisoners the space to talk through what they learned in a parenting class and what actions they plan to take as a result), through to helping with homework to develop a viable business plan for a prisoner taking a business course.
- 5.5** Unlocked has also sought to actively support prison officers to pilot new ideas in their prisons focused broadly on rehabilitation. Many focus on creating more opportunities for purposeful activity whether this is direct education or an activity that might encourage prisoners to seek educational opportunities in future. At HMYOI Isis two participants offered prisoners the opportunity to contribute to creating an allotment. This purposeful activity reached a range of prisoners who had not previously been engaged with education. It also provided a stepping-stone to more formal education as it enabled prisoners to complete qualifications in horticulture.

6. CONTACT

For more information about the points raised in this submission or Unlocked Graduates please contact:

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