

Written evidence submitted by Mr Raymond Smith

Dear Sir or Madam

Please find below my submission to the Education Select Committee on their question “Are those in prison being left behind in education.” I trust this may be of interest to the Committee in their important work.

I was in Pentonville for 6 months from November 2018 to May 2019 and attended the Journalism classes as a student through all this time and for three months of that as a classroom assistant. I have written for Inside Time on their website weekly and in the printed version monthly, often on the value of education and my experiences at that time.

It is an excellent topic and I congratulate the committee on their having chosen this as a priority. They will receive a large number of first-class submissions from many people with direct knowledge. I wish them success.

Yours faithfully

Subject: Education in Custody: Are Prisoners Being Left Behind?

1. Background and author
 - 1a. I shall commence with my background because there are 80,000 people in UK prisons today and all have their own story and their own experiences when inside and of course upon leaving. There is no stereotypical prisoner. Their past, their present and their future are all very different.
 - 1b. My name is Raymond Smith. I spent 6 months in Pentonville for fraud from November 2018 to May 2019 and this is my summary of the importance of education to those in prison and why this should be given a much higher priority within the Prison Service.
 - 1c. I left school at 16 with O Levels and went to work as a trainee manager in the retail industry. After 8 years I moved to working in Race Relations for Community Relations Councils as an employment advisor, and after that to work for the Sports Council on inner city sports development. I became the Head of Sports Development in the London Borough of Southwark, then moving to the London Borough of Brent where for some years I was the acting head of Leisure and Recreation until I took voluntary redundancy in 1994 and moved to work as a freelance advisor on Event Management and Safety in the outdoor events sector.
 - 1d. In 2017 I became involved into a fraud involving a potential grant for some of my clients for which in November 2018 I was sentenced to 12 months, 6 inside 6 on licence, and whilst I should have therefore been out on "Tag" after 3 ended up inside for the full 6 due to a mess up with paperwork at the prison (not an unusual event).
 - 1e. I found the education departments and the teachers help shape the time in prison to make it positive and that their work allows the person to see a hope and target for their future. The prison system takes away the dignity and self-belief of everyone and without that self-belief it is hard for a person to see a future, but educational achievement can put that back and is therefore a vital part of encouraging people to decide that they will not reoffend.
 - 1f. When I first stepped from the prison transport and entered the gates, I not only feared the environment but also those inside. Whilst in Pentonville I lost all my preconceived prejudices and stereotypical views. That is why I am writing to you to explain some of the outcomes for me and above all for those I met.
2. Allocation of Courses
 - 2a. The process though which I was put is I believe typical. On arrival in prison, one is placed in the reception wing, and whilst there after a general induction you are sent for an assessment procedure where English and Maths levels are checked. It ranges from very basic to complex questions and following this you are given a grade which shows the classes for which you can be considered.

- 2b You are given options of types of work or a range of classes with payment for daily attendance which is paid into your “canteen” fund from which items can be purchased. Work is higher paid than education. There is a relevance to this to which I shall return later.
- 2c I was fortunate that, quite quickly, I was taken on to the Journalism class which is now part of the Pentonville Creative Arts programme. It was through this class that I was fortunate to see so much of the work that the education did across the spectrum and their positive impact on the people who attended. The range of teaching covers classes for those with low or no literacy or numeracy skills, which includes far too many of those inside as so many have been failed by the education system; arts and creative classes; functional classes such as introduction to health and safety rules; creative writing; and journalism.
- 2d There are also courses linked with the University of Westminster on Criminology which now gives points towards OU entry level, very high quality indeed. Students at these classes alternate between attending in mornings or in afternoons and for special classes may attend both. Then people can apply for OU degree courses.
3. Prison Administration and Attitudes
- 3a Once allocated to a class, students go onto a list given to the Wing Officers who unlock them from their cells prior to the starting time of the class so that they can travel through “free flow” when you walk from one wing to another past an officer check. On many occasions there are errors with the lists and people are not called or are not permitted through to their classes causing great frustration as those studying are very committed to their studies.
- 3b It always struck me as unsatisfactory that when someone attends the same class each day and the same officer is unlocking the cells or on the gate, when there has been a clear error in the listing that they are not just permitted through as the officer knows exactly where you are going. It causes tension and frustration. People have given up courses that they really appreciated because they could not cope with the disappointment of all too often not being unlocked in the morning or allowed through free flow.
- 3c People have also given up courses because the prison did not pay them for attendance and this was repeated week after week with their complaint about this problem never resolved, not so much because they wanted the money in their “canteen” fund but because they felt their efforts to be considered worthless.
- 3d On the other hand, I have known people who refused to attend appointments with the prison medical team because it would mean them missing a class; I have known many twist the arm (not literally) of prison officers to take them to classes after medical appointments even though they were not supposed to attend; and knew one man who on three occasions made his family cancel their visit and move it to because it clashed with tuition The education classes were that important.

- 3e In my first weeks attending I thought the teaching staff were very hard on those in the classroom. On many occasions there is no sleep at night because of activity on the Wings. Perhaps the officers are carrying out unexpected searches of cells as when that happens there is a commotion from everyone banging their doors. Perhaps it was from a medical emergency in another cell which again disturbs the sleep. More often it is because someone decides to amuse themselves by making a lot of pointless noise. People fall asleep on the desk, but the teachers force them to keep awake and do their allotted tasks because, as was explained and as I observed, students get so much from their studies that if they waste a session they would regret it for days as they only get a limited amount of tuition time.
4. Purposes of Prison Education
- 4a The Committee have asked for a view of the purpose of education within prisons and the success in meeting those purposes. Does the education and training assist people in gaining employment when they leave prison? Do any qualifications received assist in that process?
- 4b That begs the question as to the purpose of all education. In an ever-changing world to me the purpose of education should be first to give a good standard of literacy and numeracy but above all to give people the ability and desire to adapt to all work needs. The technology we all use today is very different from that of 5 years ago and will evolve in the near future too. A confident person will face up to these developments and embrace them. Those who have been failed by schools cannot.
- 4c Without doubt introduction to apprenticeships and training are a fundamental part of the prison education and training schemes and are of great assistance to many. Education teams arrange correspondence courses for those inside so that they receive qualifications that can be used on release. Day release and work placements are vital and most helpful.
- 4d However the person has to have the desire to succeed. Prison structures are all about order and routine. People go where they are told and when they are told so individuality is crushed. The environment with the confined and overcrowded cells and limited opportunity for reflection is depressing.
- 4e The opportunity to set targets for improvement as given by education counter this feeling and remind people that prison is where they are and not who they are. No matter the educational level when someone enters the classes each have their own aspiration to improve and that is why the continuity of classes is so important.
- 4f There is also the attitude of officers, if not the prison management. Work on the wings is recognised as being of "value" and "importance" but education classes are seen as "fun", not essential. That is why on days when there are closures of the prison for staff training or for other reasons work details are allowed to continue, family visits permitted, but education classes are stopped, and this happens sometimes at very short notice. It disrupts study, interferes with the plans of

students, and reinforces their impression that what they do is trivial. Education classes should be considered essential and only postponed in extremis and when all other activities are also stopped.

5 Celebrating Success

5a This impression was countered whilst I was in Pentonville by the Education Team organising a monthly presentation in front of all learners of certificates of achievement to those selected by teachers of each class in a "Celebration of Success." This was not just for progress in work but also for contribution to the overall atmosphere and success of the entire group of which they were a member and was highly prized. It was moving to see how much people valued the recognition this showed and also to see the support of the others packed into the prison library for the celebration.

5b Within the classes at Pentonville there were also sessions on Philosophy which encouraged discussions around life and emotions, Shakespeare improvisation sessions, Vocalise in which students from Lincolns Inn would come in and train those inside to participate in a formal debate and after a series of classes a team of Law Students would come in and debate against the prison team in a formal and structured debate on a subject relevant to the legal system or structure, with an audience from the prison watching. Each and every one of these contributed to the individual development of all.

5c The Arts classes enabled people to express their emotions through art and realise that they had considerable ability. For me all too often art done in prison is not fully understood. The quality not only shows the talents of people inside which people who view it at exhibitions or in publications recognise but also shows their passion, frustration and future hopes and aspirations. Poetry written in prison also enables people to get their true feelings out and has great depth. This is clearly not only important for the emotional well-being of those participating and contributing but also for their sense of self-worth and desire to make the most of their future lives.

5d It was clear to me that the teaching staff could and did overcome the problems that so many in prison had within the School System which had let them down and got them to progress. Everyone meeting and beating their own personal targets encourages people to see a future for themselves, an important step in desiring to thrive outside. Improving literacy and numeracy is vital to be able to succeed. Confidence in speaking in public is a great asset, not least at job interviews post release. But above all recognising that prison is where we all were and not what we were is vital.

5e Of course the committee will receive considerable statistical information on outcomes and of value for money of the work of the education classes. Others will inform the Committee of the range of further education courses that those in prison take, including of course Open University courses. Others will give evidence to the Committee of how education in prison has changed their lives, taking them from

many years involved in crime including serious crime and letting them fulfil potential that they only found whilst inside. Some have gone into lecturing on criminology. Some have written about their experiences and had their work published to try and help others stay away from a criminal life. Many are active in campaigning for prison reform. Others write for or even edit national newspapers.

- 5f But there are many more who have used their experiences in prison to find more conventional full-time employment. My probation officers spoke proudly of men on licence who worked as engineers for British Telecom or were employed as gas fitters or electricians and who were all studying for further education qualifications. Their classes inside inspired them to pursue education outside. Indeed, there should be more encouragement and more opportunities for those leaving prison to continue studies and attendance at adult learning classes should be offered to people who would otherwise go to prison for useless short sentences as part of their community programmes. The amount of people disadvantaged by low or no literacy is a disgrace and all too often leads to crime. I believe that the proportion of those in prison with low literacy skills or with learning difficulties is as high as 33%. That is to the shame of the UK Education system which the prison education team, with sparse resources, try to overcome.
6. Impact of Covid-19
- 6a When the pandemic hit this country, it was perhaps inevitable that classes would be badly impacted as part of COVID-19 security measures, but the past 9 months have been wasted. Everyone knew a second wave was coming but far too little attention was paid on restoring the vital training and rehabilitation work that makes such a difference to people and their chances of not reoffending.
- 6b The introduction of remote teaching has been a great step forward but is not available to enough people and is of limited value to those simply learning to read and write as they lack those skills. Remote teaching is of limited use for them and of all students perhaps they need support too.
- 6c Furthermore, prison libraries are a great resource. Even during normal times access is severely limited when it should be encouraged. Now libraries are locked shut. Once a person has learnt to read the library makes the whole world available to them and improves their literacy many times over. Libraries should be open.
- 6d It is not beyond the ability of those in charge to make classrooms and libraries COVID-19 secure. Limiting numbers attending classes and spreading classes over longer parts of the day is the answer with shorter lessons and two in the morning and two in the afternoon. Additional staff would be required and of course extra resources. The failure for this to be seen or if seen to be actioned demonstrates that education is, in my view, not considered vital to rehabilitation and that I regret rehabilitation is not given the priority it should have.

- 6e For me the value and importance of education in prison was summed up by two people I met. The first, who told me he had been in and out of various institutions all his life said that whilst in the classroom it was the first time since he had been to prison that he had been treated like an adult and in order to be permitted to stay attending and joining in the classes he would behave like an adult.
- 6f The second was a man, perhaps around 40, who had received a Certificate of Achievement for his efforts in the basic literacy class. He told me he was very proud of that award but that what gave him most pride was that when his children wrote to him, he could read their letters and could write back and his knowledge that when out he would be able to read to them at night. When I left, he was waiting to get into the journalism group. It was the education department in Pentonville who had given him that. Him, and many others.
- 6g There are many others like them, but there would be many more if the Prison Management and staff recognised that education is an essential function. And above all, what is happening to these two during the pandemic? Are they demotivated? Or have they now reached the end of their sentences to be released without having the opportunity to fulfil their search for education and without the encouragement to go and continue this outside?
- 6h This disruption of classes must not be permitted to happen again. The prison service must give the education and training classes the same priority as what are classified as essential services such as food and cleaning so that they are not disrupted, other than in extreme circumstances. The role of education within rehabilitation is clear and proven and yet the prison management and staff are not fully on board with that idea.
7. Recommendations
- 7a Whilst the Committee may wish to make a number of recommendations, previous experience would show that the response of the Ministry of Justice to Parliamentary Committee reports is slow and poor. I would therefore ask this Committee in addition to listing all their recommendations to select perhaps four priorities and give a timetable for action on them so that the outcomes can be monitored, requiring that the Ministry of Justice report back within that timescale. My list is below, in my own order of importance.
- 7b Full face to face teaching must be resumed as a priority and changes to classrooms, staffing levels and prison timetables changed to accommodate that so that all seeking and needing education can do this in the classroom.
- 7c The use of laptops and electronic devices that has been expanded during the pandemic must be extended. Access to libraries must be increased as those inside get such benefit from access to literature.

- 7d Basic literacy and numeracy classes should be offered to those convicted of crimes that would normally lead to a short (under 6 months) sentence as this would be far more useful in giving people life opportunities.
- 7e The educational achievements of those leaving prisons should be monitored and, with the reoffending rates within 12 months of those who have left should be recorded against the Prison performance by the inspectorate as a good prison will work to rehabilitate as a priority. Whilst OFSTED assess the quality of the education given it is not just the quality of classes that counts but the enthusiasm of all the officers in recognising how important this is.
- 7f Prison administration must ensure that officers are provided with the correct information to ensure students reach their classes on time and are not held up within prison movements from wing to wing.
- 7g Prison education staff and those involved in the education process should receive high pay as it is a stressful, difficult, and often dangerous job, to ensure that the very best teachers work in prisons, and attention should be given to the number of classes per day to maximise opportunities. Education staff numbers should also reflect this enhanced programme.
8. And Finally
- 8a However the problems of low attendance in classes and lack of motivation of those taking them will be solved when the Ministry of Justice, the Prison Service, all institutions under the control of the MoJ including public sector and private sector units, all Governors or heads of services and indeed all Prison Staff recognise that education which leads to motivation and rehabilitation is an absolute priority and not a distraction and ensure that everyone can make their classes and that never again any reason or excuse can be made for closing classes or putting barriers in the way of attendance. It is the failure to prioritise education and to provide enough time and resources to support it that is holding people back, even before the pandemic, and also why once the pandemic hit the closure of classes was all too easy to introduce. It is certainly not the lack of commitment or skill of the teachers providing lessons in prisons today.
- 8b Life after prison is always difficult for people. Their having been in prison will make it harder to find work and at a time when unemployment will without doubt rise due to the outcome of the pandemic as the economy takes time to recover for those just released it may be much tougher and people must be prepared to put up with many disappointments but to carry on trying until they succeed. The Ministry of Justice and the Prison Service should recognise that whilst education does not give those in prison all the answers for their future lives, it does at least assist them to understand the questions that will be asked of them in their future.

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