Written evidence submitted by CODE4000

CODE4000

Teaching Tech, Changing Lives

Who are Code4000?

Code4000 provide computer programming training in prisons. Our students follow a curriculum that guides them from coding novice to full-stack (fully trained) programmer. The curriculum starts with the basics of web-design (HTML), moves through to more advanced web-development concepts (CSS), and then moves onto making websites interactive (JavaScript). Students who make rapid progress, or those on longer sentences, can then go on to study more advanced programming languages such as Java and PHP.

Our curriculum is designed with the technology job market in mind and the skills we teach are based around market need. The tech industry is crying out for skilled programmers rather than qualifications, consequently we do not offer an accredited course. Our model is based on the "coding bootcamps" (short, intensive training courses designed to rapidly prepare software developers for employment) that are being increasingly used for tech sector recruitment.

In addition, our academies follow industry practices. Our classrooms are light and spacious and offer a relaxed environment where students are expected to show self-discipline and good time management in their approach to their studies. Daily stand-ups, pair programming, peer support, and agile working are observed to replicate the technology working environment.

As well as coding training, we offer a full "through the gate" service that supports our graduates into employment, education, or training upon release. Once released, graduates work with our regional managers who provide equipment (typically donated, refurbished laptops), employability support, and further guided training. In many cases, we have successfully brokered employment or training opportunities for our graduates long before they are released from prison.

Our outcomes speak for themselves. 40% of our graduates are employed in the tech sector as software developers, freelance designers, or entrepreneurs (the national

rate for any form of employment amongst UK prisoners is 17%). 10% are in higher education and a further 37% remain positively engaged with Code4000, where we continue to support them to find work or training.

Two Code4000 graduates now work in the financial sector, for major high-street banking chains. This exemplifies our pioneering approach to engagement with the tech industry and has seen us overcome existing barriers to employment for those with a criminal record.

Just as important though is the transformative effect learning to code has on our students. They are evangelical about coding: they are proud of their work and love to demonstrate their projects to visitors to the academies. Students are empowered to help and mentor their peers and to deliver their own classroom sessions (which they frequently do). Some collected quotes from our students include “it [the academy] is not like prison at all” and “coding has opened up a whole new world for me”.

Prison education

The Code4000 model works because it is specialised and dynamic, and links skills delivery with post-release outcomes, outcomes which we believe should be the purpose of prison education. While in prison, Code4000 students partake in meaningful activity that encourages both the development of knowledge while building confidence and self-esteem. Meanwhile, students are also learning valuable, much sought after skills that, when leveraged by our “through the gate” service, can lead to high-quality education, training, or employment opportunities once released. Education and training in prison should always be oriented towards such opportunities.

Our curriculum is flexible and dynamic and driven by change in the software development industry. As a particular programming language drops out of favour in the tech sector, so does our focus on that language within our academies. Because of this focus on relevant skills (as opposed to the delivery of qualifications) we can effectively pivot our programme to align with the skills required in the tech industry. By so doing, we maximise the employability of our students. Again, this is the

advantage of Code4000's model, being, as it is, focussed and based around skills provision.

Code4000 take the view that anybody can learn to code, and we have an open and inclusive approach to recruiting students to the programme. While we would typically recommend that students have Level 2 in Maths and English before joining the programme, these requirements are not set in stone. Our principal requirement is that a student is keen to learn and has expressed a desire to work in the technology industry upon release. Students are interviewed prior to joining the course by the academy instructor and any potential barriers to learning identified. Our regional managers work with the student, the instructor, and other stakeholders such as probation workers and personal officers, to formulate supportive learning plans that help the student progress.

We incentivise participation in Code4000 academies in two ways. Firstly, by creating a learning environment that students want to attend and by providing interesting and challenging course material that many students eventually take up as a hobby. As discussed previously, our classrooms are light, spacious, and comfortable and we empower students to develop self-discipline and a personalised approach to work and learning that they would be expected to develop working in the technology industry. Our students see the Code4000 programme as separate to the prison experience, somewhere where they can learn, help others, and take pride in their personal and skills development. Secondly, from the moment they join the course, we work with students to plan their release. We offer realistic pathways into employment and training and involve students in discussions around where their coding journey might take them. The Code4000 programme provides its students a clear and realistic path out of reoffending. Because of these factors, the Code4000 classroom is somewhere our students want to be. As an organisation, we take great pride in the fact that our students take their textbooks back to their cells after lessons and, in two sites, have actually petitioned to governor to allow them to remain in class throughout their lunch!

However, despite our successes we still find significant barriers to delivering high-quality, relevant, and up-to-date skills training. A lack of a monitored Internet connection in our academies prevents our students from accessing the latest, up-to-

the-minute developments in the technology industry. It also prevents students from accessing the vast array of online learning material that could help them significantly with their coding studies. For all our efforts to replicate a realistic working environment for our students, the lack of an Internet connection is a significant drawback. As you can probably understand, costs of setting up a Code4000 coding academy are higher than for other prison training programmes. Finding the initial outlay for equipment is a barrier to our expansion into other prisons where our award-winning programme has been requested by the governor. Furthermore, supporting those graduates who now reside in open prisons has proven challenging; whether that is arranging RoTL to work experience programmes or providing equipment on which they can continue their learning, we have experienced little success.

We are a small, efficient team with running costs of less than £200,000 per annum (which includes three academies of thirty student each). With our proof-of-concept model of skills training and career planning, we are scalable and ready to expand into further prisons. For more information on Code4000 and what we do, visit our website: www.code4000.org.

January 2021