# Written evidence submitted by Coracle Online Ltd

This submission is from Coracle Online Ltd. Founded in 2007 by James Tweed, Coracle is a private limited EdTech company based in Newmarket, Suffolk. We are on a mission to create a world where no-one is isolated from learning opportunities: we do this by developing technology and systems to support isolated learners. Since 2017 we have been involved in innovating within the prison estate around digital education through our Coracle Inside project.

Coracle Inside is a secure digital learning platform, specially designed for use in-cell by incarcerated individuals. Our security pen-tested devices offer a safe, learner focussed digital experience to support education and employability, as well as improving mental health and wellbeing, without internet access or other connectivity. The development of Coracle Inside has been motivated and driven in response to James Tweed's MPhil (Cantab) 2017 thesis, *"The role of education on prisoners' mindsets and rehabilitation"*.

We are often told that rehabilitation of offenders is considered a priority target by the Ministry of Justice. Since the Woolf report of 1991 there has been general acceptance that rehabilitation plays a central role in the battle to reduce reoffending rates, however, despite a number of education related initiatives, the challenge of reducing reoffending has not been met in the UK.

Educational activities in prison have been found to provide an effective element in providing prisoners with a focussed means of filling time as part of the approach to tackling anti-social behaviour, serious prison misconduct and violence. Whilst 81% of prisoners are motivated to learn as a means of occupying their time only 70% believed it would improve their employability (2014 survey). If the purpose of education is simply to fill time then the goal of tackling recidivism will fail. Challenging conventional thinking around the approach to education in prison is critical if positive economic and societal outcomes are to be achieved: formerly incarcerated people will have a better chance of contributing to society on release if they are in the workforce.

Working in partnership with employers by creating shared value requires leadership in the form of policies and frameworks that incentivise sustainable goals around employment of individuals with criminal records with recognition being given to the fact that employers employ people based on mindset and attitude. Employers can teach skills required for their particular work, but they won't engage people who don't have the ability or willingness to learn.

For learning to be achieved, prison leaders should create cultures where teachers can teach and learners can learn. This includes acknowledging the shift in society towards a digital world. EdTech has changed the landscape of teaching, training and learning. This has been highlighted as schools closed for Covid and there are lessons to be learned and applied to the prison education sector.

Isolation, in the physical sense, may be considered a legitimate goal of incarceration, whilst isolation in an emotional or educational sense is a more nuanced issue and one which is only being addressed by including the concept of rehabilitation in the definition of the purpose of prison. Delivery of good quality education can assist in removing isolation, enabling time in-cell to be used more productively. Significant changes are required in the way education can be delivered and supported in prisons, making it more comparable to learning outside of prison, opening opportunities for prisoners to explore learning options, engage in digital learning and develop digital literacy. The importance of providing access to education to those who are

isolated is as much about recognising that being included can be as important as being engaged. Monitoring a range of metrics, including engagement as well as attitude to learning can play an important role in helping people on a pathway to change. Technology must have a role to play in a sustainable future, not least because data is key to understanding effectiveness. Collecting detailed, anonymous learning records data to measure user activity, engagement, and attainment, combined with feedback questionnaires allows changes in users attitude and aptitude to be measured.

Our thesis is based on the fact that access to digital resources to support education, employability and well-being supports rehabilitation. Providing the tools to support educational outcomes, to improve employability and support well-being is achieved by recognising the role of education on a prisoners 'mindset. We recognise that making connections between epistemological concepts such as learning theories and the concept of mindset can be problematic and we promote an interdisciplinary approach for future studies in this area. Underpinning our approach to digital provision is a general philosophy towards learning intervention that supports the triple goals of Detect (ability, knowledge gaps and mindset), Protect (against stigma caused by previous failings) and Correct (by providing access to content and the tools to support learning).

There appears to be a continuous risk of prison education being represented as a reward for criminal behaviour, as opposed to being a service for wider social benefit. This theme echoes research that shows education to be undervalued across many urban minority communities, due to the fact that despite taking part, the beneficiaries find themselves unable to generate tangible benefits. General theories draw conclusions that education and training lead to improved cognitive outcomes, which in turn improves pro-social behaviour, emotional maturity, empathy and control and when this is applied to prisoners there is a link to desisting from criminal behaviour. Research has shown that the belief held by an individual as to the malleability of their intelligence, known as their mindset, influences motivation as well achievement.

Organisations often categorise and incentivise individuals with techniques such as targets and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), designed to assess and quantify the success and impact of an individual. Applying similar criteria to learning inevitably leads to the process of examination and grading. The difference however is that the individual who undertakes learning is not competing against other learners, but with themselves. Re-framing the purpose of instruction away from a target based approach unlocks the potential for a learner to build knowledge without the fear of humiliation in a test.

Self-confidence, the ability to collaborate, communicate and to improve emotional regulation are as important as is the process of learning and developing skills. Encouraging an enthusiasm for curiosity, imagination and creativity requires the learner to work on self-discipline, to be adaptable and to concentrate: characteristics which are not immediately associated with offenders. In reality, many offenders are potentially ready to learn; having often displayed good levels of critical thinking, reasoning, organisation, planning and decision making, albeit in ways which are inappropriate.

Shifting attitudes of prisoners away from 'what's the point' represents a significant challenge, in which a digital approach is capable of making a meaningful impact. A report by the charity Unlocked, showed that only one in ten prisoners believe that 'learning was not for people like me. 'This paradox is the result of an education system that sees many people in the prison system effectively self-exclude, rather than face the humiliation of being excluded.

The purpose of education must be considered in the context of the incarcerated population. In the same way as adult learners differ from child learners (andragogy vs pedagogy), so perhaps we should consider that prison learners represent a category that requires special attention.

We should also recognise that the prison population is ethnically diverse, with a disproportionately high level of socially disadvantaged individuals. Many have struggled accessing education in their past. There is a much higher than average occurrence of learning difficulties and special educational needs. Prisoners often refer to school in terms of their experience (generally negative) rather than outcomes or qualifications. Permanent exclusion from school is rare (0.1% of 8 million children in schools in England were permanently excluded in 2016/17 (Timpson review of school exclusion May 2019)) however studies have shown that 63% of prisoners had been temporarily excluded and 42% permanently excluded.

In schools, the Timpson report on exclusion notes that "for children, the staff member who notices their talent or takes the time to ask about life at home can make a difference to whether they feel valued and inspired by school. Some children will tell you it was a member of the kitchen staff or pastoral team who they clicked with, or who helped them settle into school life. It is also often these staff members who must respond to poor behaviour when it occurs." This observation makes an important point about the role of education. It implies that knowledge transfer is only part of the importance of the education process. The other key element being the ability to make connections and to feel listened to. That is not to say that it is the role of prison educators to understand or address the complex needs of their learners, however, it is to say that education should be viewed as part of a co-ordinated multi-agency approach.

From an educational perspective, even the most passive environment can result in someone learning something, although much of what that person will pick up might be inaccurate or inappropriate. Research confirms that taking an active stance is beneficial to learning. If a course has a passive approach, learners will reflect that passivity. If we assume that learners will turn up with a sponge-like mind, ready to be filled as we pour knowledge out at them, rather like an empty glass being held under a running tap, then they are likely to become frustrated as their capacity to retain information quickly diminishes. On the other hand if we create an environment that encourages the learner to develop ideas from new information and to take advantage of their existing understanding around a topic then we have created an active environment.

Encouraging intrinsic motivation (the desire to learn that comes from within you) for incarcerated learners is a challenge. Success requires course providers to clearly explain the objectives, explain the benefits, vary the content, make learning social, tailor learning to individuals, divide content into manageable chunks, provide teasers and intriguing questions, give plenty of feedback, show worked examples and make it fun. It is not unusual for interest in learning to wax and wane over time and this variance may be pronounced in the case of incarcerated learners. How can an individual find the motivation to learn? Who hasn't said "I've always wanted to learn how to…", but done nothing about it? We allow ourselves to think that some of these unfulfilled wishes are going to stay unfulfilled because they're too ambitious or time-consuming. The desire to learn a language is a typical case: learning is slow and initially difficult, so there's the rush of initial enthusiasm which can hit a brick wall when things get difficult. It helps to be interested in what you're studying. Thinking of basic questions you've long wanted an answer to is a good way of deciding what your interest is, and each answer is a milestone on the learning journey. Csikszentmihalyi's theory of "flow" suggests you can get absorbed by an activity as long as it's not too easy but not too challenging either. It follows that learners should set goals that they stand a chance of achieving.

From the learner's point of view, a passive attitude would be exemplified by an expectation that the course leader has 'total knowledge' and therefore anyone with 'total knowledge' can teach others. This is a very

dangerous assumption. A more active approach acknowledges that a course leader has certain knowledge and that they give thought as to how to present that knowledge in a meaningful manner that guides the learner without necessarily providing the actual answers. In this way the learner is expected to use the framework provided to find examples and then to lean on the course leader as a mentor figure to develop a reflective, potentially even discursive, approach in order to broaden the overall understanding of the topic in question.

Finally, facilitating digital in-cell education, health and wellbeing support can promote equality, diversity and inclusion. The use of digital education technologies not only addresses these issues but also greatly reduces the carbon footprint of education services whilst reduced reoffending and a decreased prison population through improved employments opportunities resulting from access to education would significantly reduce the carbon footprint of the prison system.

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