

Written evidence submitted by Progressing Prisoners Maintaining Innocence (PPMI)

Education – are prisoners being left behind?

Submission to the Parliamentary Education Committee Inquiry

PPMI is grateful for the opportunity to submit information to the Committee, as it is an important area of our work and experience.

Our small group of PPMI volunteers has been in existence since 2004, but in 2016 we decided to try and gather experience from people in prison who are maintaining innocence, so our comments below come from a sample of around 330 prisoners in more than 60 UK prisons. Maintaining Innocence carries the possibility of hindered progression through the prison system, so OBPs are often discussed, but we also learn some of their views on general education.

What is the purpose of education in prisons?

As with education in the community, the purpose of education in prison is primarily to improve the clarity of one's worldview through the acquisition and employment of myriad personal and inter-personal skills and knowledge acquired during the process of learning. Rehabilitation could therefore be defined as the useful occupation of time in the gaining of skills to be used for pro-social purposes following release from prison.

For so many in youth and adult custody, a continuation or reinforcement of their school learning, from Entry Level to Level 2, and, more importantly for the illiterate, what is often their first real chance to learn to read and write.

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

Not an area where we can contribute but we would like to see such data.

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

Limited experience here, but PPMI does receive letters clearly written by those with poor writing skills and some tell us they are dyslexic. These create disadvantage throughout their CJS experience.

Also, disabled prisoners struggle with additional isolation. No officially sanctioned/structured support programmes. I once offered a prison visit to a profoundly deaf man, but we could find no way of getting help with this, either inside or from outside the prison. The disabled often find the only help available coming from other prisoners.

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

In some prisons, vocational courses are good. Textiles, cleaning, (but pointless for convicted sex offenders, as they are excluded from almost anything except businesses that can be run from home).

Any guidance for embarking on OU courses and scholarships, such as the Longford Trust, would be of benefit.

We would welcome any possibility of continuing education on licence, or at least encouraging it. Police and Probation seem to be overly focused on the crime/s and re-offending, which maybe to the detriment of rehabilitation and the goal to reduce recidivism.

For most prisoners, but especially those maintaining innocence, vocational courses are of much more benefit than the OBP ones, which have been shown to be ineffective at best, and damaging at worst.

How can successful participation in education be incentivised in prisons?

Could they be deemed to count towards Risk reduction? There are data to show that education is one of the forces behind successful resettlement; in fact, education is one of the recognised 7 Pathways. Participation on courses is usually risk assessed, and some prisoners find themselves barred due to certain convictions; this is a barrier to risk reduction. More money can be earned in prison workshops. If prison earnings could be brought in line this would provide added incentive to engage with education.

In-cell study should be incentivised via the IEP Scheme – at present, education is seen as something of an ‘optional extra,’ with the primary focus being on profit via the prison workshops. While this may be good for the prison, it offers little by way of realistic prospects for individual prisoners. Mind-numbingly boring employment skills should not be deemed a suitable replacement for what many people undoubtedly consider a rewarding criminal lifestyle.

More effort needs to be made to force the idea of education above the current perception of it being *“Something other than the workshop.”*

How might apprenticeships work for those in custody?

Lower security prisons would lend themselves - Cat C or D via RoTL. Difficulty is finding host companies, especially at present, and RoTL not happening.

Certain offences/convictions automatically deem the prisoner ineligible for RoTL. This is both counter-intuitive and counter-productive. If, as the government wants us to believe, those with sexual and/or violent convictions are of the highest risk of re-offending/serious harm, there should be greater focus on reducing this risk; currently, by denying the prisoner access to 2 of the 7 risk reducing pathways (education (by way of apprenticeships on RoTL) & family ties (by way of RoTL)) the chance to reduce their ‘risk’ in a real-world (monitored by the NPS) scenario is being unfairly denied these prisoners.

Are current resources for prison learning meeting need?

With the ever-growing numbers of people in prison this seems unlikely. The money-tree branches are not extending widely enough into the right areas of the prison estate.

With prisoner education funding disappearing and the prison population increasing, the suggestion that education will reduce re-offending is becoming more and more unrealistic. Available resources contradict this argument. Changes in education provider in individual prisons bring with them their own issues. What was available under one provider might not be available under the next, with the transition from one provider to the other often making study, and access to study materials, difficult.

A dearth of designated classrooms in some older prisons is an issue, especially on the VP units. This often results in a growing list of unmet and stagnant prisoner applications. Such lists often reduce much faster by the processes of prisoner release and transfer than by the natural ebb and flow of actively participating students. Many prisons do not have designated classrooms, with some sharing the ones they do have with other (non-VP) wings; this presents its own security issues. Some prisons offer only part-time programmes, which is better than nothing, though far from ideal.

What should happen when prison education is assessed as not meeting standards?

Individual findings would need to be addressed point by point. To a large extent, education conflicts with the prison regime.

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

In some cases autonomy is helpful. *It is loss of autonomy by prison governors that has, in my view, prevented or ended creative attempts by some governors to promote more diverse and better educational opportunities. More autonomy means that there is a chance to try things out at a local level, without having to wait for changes to national policy. Also, what works in one prison may be irrelevant or not possible in another, depending on many factors including prison location, type of prisoner, etc.*

. Different trusts. Distance learning – deadlines will be missed. Some guarantee of expected transfer (in lower security classification cases) could be introduced for the prisoner to prepare; time to meet deadlines or apply to defer, etc. Access to resources is also limited. Pens/paper education-related material could be provided (sent in by post (direct from approved supplier) for those with little private cash) by family or friends. National policy would need to change. Risk aversion over such matters is too rigid.

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

Better in privately run, from our findings. They tend to be more relaxed and staff more accommodating. Cat Cs often. Relaxed atmosphere makes it easier to study. Business aspect helps here, as stakeholder profit is involved. Publicly run prisons have no incentive to indicate performance. In general, they house longer sentence prisoners. Higher security prisons, Cat A and B, prisoners are locked up for longer.

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

The fact that a prisoner is in the middle of educational course/s should be given greater priority than at present, as prisoners are moved, often with little or no warning

Records, qualifications, etc., do not follow immediately to the receiving prison, or sometimes not at all; both continuity and hopes of progression are lost. An up-to-date and accurate record should follow each prisoner to facilitate the educational process, as 'lost' or incomplete courses are a waste of time for prisoners and a waste of teaching resources.

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