

Written evidence submitted by Weston College

Weston College has been a provider of prison education for over 8 years and in 2019 was awarded the prestigious Prison Education Framework contract to deliver education services in 19 prisons across the South East and South West.

The College, rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted, now provides nationally recognised qualifications and a wide range of extracurricular opportunities to thousands of offenders.

Delivery focuses on transformational learning and raising aspirations; changing learners' perceptions of education and ensuring that education packages meet the needs of offenders when they complete their sentences. With nearly one third of prisoners self-identifying as having a learning difficulty and/or disability, the College leads the way in tailoring its programmes and teaching to suit the needs of SEND learners, ensuring the best possible outcome from their studies.

The College is committed to helping a new generation of offenders gain skills which will help them to seek and acquire employment after their release. To achieve this, nationally recognised qualifications are delivered in all its prisons, providing high standards of quality in teaching.

The organisation takes pride in ensuring its standards and expectations are high, with an absolute focus on maximising the success and progress of its learners.

What is the purpose of education in prisons?

The main purpose of prison education is to deliver relevant skills, training and qualifications to equip learners with the ability to progress in life, improve their social and economic opportunities and reduce the risk of recidivism.

On first entry into the prison system, offenders should be fully assessed so that their individual needs can be identified and planned for. From an education point of view this should include their Maths and English abilities and their Learning Difficulties or Disabilities (LDD) needs. However, this is not to be completed in isolation and should be considered alongside any other needs which may prove to be a barrier towards achievement of their learning goals, e.g. substance misuse, mental health and/or offending behaviours.

Ideally these assessments will progress with the offenders on their journey through the system and be updated on a regular basis as goals are met, with new targets being set as and when required. The offender may be willing to learn and achieve but may often find themselves completing the same assessments repeatedly as they enter each prison, due to the prisons' allocations process.

The curriculum offer should be relevant and appropriate to the learner demographic and meet the needs and requirements of the serving establishment alongside local and national employers. The programme of study should be individualised and meet

learners' needs whilst reviewing and recording progression. Many prisoners have had negative experiences of education throughout their life and therefore it is key that prison education should engage, inspire and provide a safe and secure environment for learners to feel valued and breakdown any previous barriers to learning. Prisoner learners should expect the same level of education as in mainstream education, delivered by suitably qualified teachers at the required standards. As well as providing skills and qualifications to support employment on release, provision must also enable and develop learners' self-esteem, confidence, behaviour, mental health and well-being. For those who have any LDD needs, they should be given the opportunities, (with the right strategies), to be part of and included in the curriculum, with much encouragement and additional resources and materials. Weston College provides purposeful activity whilst in custody and a pro-social path for offenders to follow, gain achievement (sometimes for the first time in their life) which can motivate them to achieve other goals in their life.

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

When the Prison Education Framework contract began on 1st April 2019, HMPPS introduced a Management Information System called "Curious". This was the first time a central system had been developed to capture learner attainment within a secure setting. Previously, under the Offender Learning and Skills Service contracts, providers used a variety of systems and data was uploaded via the Individual Learner Record (ILR) to the Skills Funding Agency. There was no ability to track learner progress and achievement across the prison estate between different providers.

Since the Covid 19 pandemic, Curious has not been used to its full potential due to the existence of different delivery models and recording processes. However, it is important to note that Curious is still evolving, and there is now a standardised system in place to record and monitor learner progression, attainment, initial assessment and LDD requirements across the prison estate. Further work is required to effectively collate educational levels and starting points, as initial assessments are routinely carried out, but not always at an appropriate time in prisoners' sentences. The process of induction is influenced by prison regime and timings rather than a qualitative process.

The screening of LDD has been diverse amongst all providers and recently a working group has been established in order to ensure consistency across the estate. This process and design have been supported by Weston College with expert advice from SEND specialists. This is a complex area, particularly when substance abuse and prolonged abuse can influence performance during an assessment or low literacy levels can be interpreted as an LDD rather than what it is.

Aligned with the introduction of the Curious system was the creation of the Teacher Quality Management Plan (TQMP). The TQMP is a tool for HMPPS to monitor and record the quality of the provider's delivery. This includes quality of teaching, learner outcomes, staff qualifications and CPD. Again, the TQMP is an evolving document and has been revised due to the Covid pandemic.

Curious and the TQMP will be used by all key stakeholders, both as an academic monitoring tool but also as contractual monitoring tool. This will enable a transparent and robust data collection system to review and improve performance and make informed analytical decisions.

Other data is in existence to demonstrate effectiveness of education and training which includes, but is not limited to the following:

- Data Justice Lab
- Ofsted inspection reports
- Awarding organisation reports
- Virtual Campus
- P-Nomis

The robust auditing and scrutiny of data in this area is key, in line with ESFA audits of education providers.

Data is collected in various formats and by various departments within prisons, but connectivity needs to be improved. However, the major data gap is in prisoner destination data for those who have been released. There is no shared data source that allows the provider to see the real impact of what the learner has achieved and how this has impacted on their return to society. Due to different providers offering different services, the College does not have a clear line of sight to see how its education provision has helped ex-offenders to secure a job, settle back into family life and any of the other markers that would typically demonstrate success.

However, Weston College has developed a system in line with security requirements, whereby a functional email address is given to learners upon release to capture valuable destination data for those learners who choose to make contact.

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

Historically, qualifications offered within the prison estate have been determined by resources, environment, funding, regime and individual decision making. Qualifications could be outdated, at a low level and with little progression opportunities to level 3 and above. However, curriculum development has progressed significantly, but there is more work required to design effective curriculums in line with local market intelligence which are up to date with the educational landscape within the UK and its relationship with employers. In many situations the prison regime and facilities influence the curriculum offer. This can include full and part time work, industry and purposeful activity spaces as well as the type of prison, demographic and length of stay. Much is based on education not being part-time and therefore qualifications are planned over short timescales, such as Functional Skills courses completed in 4 weeks and construction courses completed in 12-14 weeks. This could be regarded as churn of activity and not the long-term acquisition of knowledge and skills. Courses need to be designed with employer input, as is now required with a number of new technical qualifications.

But it's important to note that the College leads the way in terms of many areas of excellent and good practice, but further work is required to engage with employers within custody and Through The Gate activities. It has been proved that employer academies have a positive impact and the opportunity for learners to secure sustainable employment whilst in prison, which greatly enhances their chances of not re-offending. The introduction of the New Futures Network is positive but further alignment and funding is required to bring all services together with a co-ordinated strategy for employer engagement. This would include, HMPPS, PEF, DPS providers, CRC, Probation, CFO, TTG, OMU and employers.

As a step forward it is recommended that the training provider has more autonomy to develop a curriculum that best meets the needs of the prison, potential employers and the economy as a whole. Without this flexibility there is a danger of a lack of tailored delivery in some prison establishments.

How can successful participation in education be incentivised in prisons?

Whenever education is incentivised in the prison estate it usually takes the form of extra wages for the prisoners. Whilst this may encourage engagement in the short term, this does not tackle the learners' perception as to why their education is important. The most effective way of getting an offender to engage with the educational provision is to make it part of the Offender Management Unit's sentence planning. This will ensure education will stand equally with behaviour management programmes. Learners would also benefit greatly from direct links to employment routes through the vocational courses they study.

Education needs to be shown as a credible pathway within the prison system. There is greater need to engage employers to define the requirements for skilled positions, and the benefits of such roles. To incentivise education, it needs to be either made compulsory or pay at a rate that allows a prisoner to study full time.

Gaining good work ethics whilst in custody, keeping the prisoner occupied and equipping them with life and work skills can be achieved. However, the somewhat disjointed current system means there can be conflicting interests with too many parties competing for the same prisoners and often the more challenging prisoners left to self-engage with limited support.

How might apprenticeships work for those in custody?

There is no reason why technical qualifications and apprenticeships cannot be operated in the micro working world of industries within prison and particularly ROTL.

Apprenticeships and Technical Qualifications are being utilised to enhance education within the UK, therefore when prisoners are moving beyond the gate these are the very qualifications they should be equipped with.

There are two areas which need to be given attention to this end – the requirement of an employment contract in order to partake in apprenticeship and the transfer of prisoners that cause withdrawals when on long term qualifications.

However, they should not be ‘watered’ down to fit piecemeal work. There would need to be a greater link with Industries and Education and more emphasis on the learning and skills gathered during work. Designing time between work and education (e.g. 20% of the job) would support this link. Again, this would be a logistical consideration regarding the movement of prisoners within the regime and managing allocations.

The prisoner’s journey from start to finish could be designed to culminate in the apprenticeship, building the portfolio through the journey of the relevant parts – English/Maths/IT, Employability skills and the knowledge qualification and then the technical work experience either through ROTL or the later stages in the training prison within suitable work/industries.

Weston College delivers large national apprenticeship contracts and would be in a strong position to support the national development of robust and relevant apprenticeships within HMPPS. It is crucial that this work is linked to the excellent work of the Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education and not a reinvention of a wheel.

Are current resources for prison learning meeting need?

There are many excellent resources that have been produced and introduced by providers and prisons during the delivery of the contracts, but the real investment in resource still needs to be around ICT provision, particularly with in-cell technology. The Covid pandemic has proved that in-cell technology is vitally important and that learners within a custodial setting are not receiving the same level of support and learning opportunities due to lack of ICT. Due to security restrictions in place around equipment and connectivity to the internet, a learner with already low ICT skill level will remain woefully behind what is seen and expected in society.

Funding is needed to address aging infrastructure, inadequate ICT and provide a learning environment that is fit for purpose. Then the purpose of prison will shift from punitive to rehabilitative to opportunistic. The challenge within the prison estate is that if prisons are to be measured in the same way as colleges, schools and universities, then the funding needs to be appropriate, otherwise the playing field is not level.

Providers and prisons should be constantly reflecting on need in the local community and looking at how to equip learners to ensure they are prepared for release. Challenges are linked to the digital curriculum and whilst the integration of essential digital skills will go some way to equipping learners for the workforce, there is a need for greater assimilation of ICT equipment in the prison estates. Current technology within the prison system is poor and hence puts learners at a disadvantage when competing for employment in the 21st century workforce market.

Due to the Covid pandemic Weston College has adapted quickly and reviewed delivery of resources along with all providers nationally. The College is working collaboratively with HMPPS to design high quality learning through both written work and where possible digital (e.g. DVDs) This includes relevant resources and translations for those with little or no English.

Weston College is committed to the investment of resources including ICT but the contract methodology brings its limitations. A full ICT refresh is taking place within the education buildings including new broadband lines to support the introduction of Virtual Campus 2. Additional funding is required to expand the digital accessibility across the prison estate.

The College views the training of its staff as key to the success of delivery. It is fully recognised that the greatest resource is the staff. Staff are all trained to a minimum level, and all delivery is carried out by qualified teachers. New staff undergo a rigorous induction process introducing them to the prison estate and working with offenders. It is through this process that the College can ensure that learners within the Weston College provision experience the best possible learning and progression opportunities.

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

Using Ofsted in isolation to grade education fails to take into account the complexities of the environment and where decisions are actually made. The joint responsibility of the journey of a prisoner through education is still a work in progress.

There is variability across the estate of the management/accountability of education. It is imperative that all governors and their teams are entirely invested in the development of education as part of their provision and that partnership working with providers is the norm. Contracting of education, even in education outside of prison, carries risk with accountability. This fundamental question needs a review – is it better to develop one national prison college approach rather than contract to a small number of providers?

The College provision is continually developing culturally to align with the Ofsted 'outstanding' Weston College. Shared practice in staff development and shared resources, such as the utilisation of the Centre of Excellence, and a more collaborative curriculum approach, is allowing Prison Education to access the excellent education facilities that Weston College has on offer. The delivery model is now more unified in its approach and hence has a greater array of resources and opportunity at its disposal. The Weston College model of ensuring the learners are truly immersed in a college experience highlights the positive feedback received in relation to its delivery methodology

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

A large part of the prison resources, both ICT and infrastructure require updating. However, if there is to be a true partnership with education providers, they should be allowed to work with prison estates to develop their education provision physically (e.g. classroom design - such as chairs, desk, and timetable design). However, this is only possible if contracts are supported with investment and adequate funding.

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

One aspect of curriculum design is the demographic of the individual prison which includes average length of stay. However, currently prison education contracts mainly support lower level learners at Entry – Level 2. Therefore, the longest full-time courses are 13–15 weeks long. Typically, longer courses are only on offer at those prisons with a longer average stay and learners should undertake those courses at the appropriate time of their sentence. Shorter courses are provided at local prisons which have a shorter stay and high churn. Learners do have the opportunity to study at a higher level and are supported in completing their courses, but this is dependent on securing funding and length of sentence.

The introduction of Curious and the Common Awarding body organisations supports and standardises the continuation of learning across the prison estate but there are limits. Further work is required in the sequencing of curriculums to ensure consistency of learning opportunities and the ability to continue studies.

Through adopting a wider variety of courses and sequencing curriculum models, prisoners of different sentence lengths have maximum exposure to course opportunities throughout their sentence.

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