

Written evidence submitted by PeoplePlus

PeoplePlus is a leading public services provider with over 15 years' experience in prison education. We deliver 317 qualifications across 22 prisons, amounting to over two million hours of learning and vocational training each year.

For over 20 years, we have successfully delivered skills, employment, justice and adult social care services to tens of thousands of customers. We do so on behalf of Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), as well as Local Authorities across England, Wales and Scotland.

PeoplePlus welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the committee and considers this inquiry to be timely, particularly given the impact of COVID-19 which means that the labour market will now be even more challenging for those who have spent time within the criminal justice system. For the rehabilitation agenda to be truly effective, we must remain focused on effective in-custody careers guidance and prison education so that we minimise the factors that contribute to re-offending.

What is the purpose of prison education?

The purpose of prison education is to transform the lives of individuals, enabling them to develop skills and knowledge that will allow them to fulfil their potential as productive members of society. In doing so, they will have better access employment on release and a genuine opportunity to integrate fully and positively into their communities.

Evidence shows that the majority of individuals who end up in the criminal justice system have had a challenging start, including a significant proportion who faced disrupted school lives.

By way of illustration:

- 57% of people across the prison estate are assessed as having primary school levels of literacy and numeracy.
- Almost a quarter (24%) have spent time in the care system.
- Nearly one third have declared learning difficulties or disabilities.
- 42% have been permanently excluded from school.
- An estimated 7.3% of women and 3.6% of men have experienced domestic abuse.

Achieving qualifications and improving employability is the primary goal, but education to employment (ETE) interventions also contribute to broader outcomes that support people in moving away from a life of crime. For instance, building a learning community within the prison environment creates positive peer networks and can change the custodial culture. Individuals are praised for their successes and given chances to help and support others. It also provides a space away from the stresses of prison life and creates the space for personal growth and psychological recovery.

Successful learning can:

- increase motivation
- build confidence and knowledge; and
- provide each person with a greater understanding of the opportunities that are available to them, as well as how they can access those opportunities.

This is particularly important for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who have not had access to positive role models in early life.

ETE also opens doors to help them make new choices in the community and it builds hope for the future. It allows the possibility of a new identity as a student, as an employee, as a business owner. Ultimately, it provides them with the confidence and tools to make a positive contribution on release from prison.

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

Last year, we commissioned Dr Jane Dominey from Cambridge University's Institute of Criminology to undertake research on education to employment outcomes. Her report "*ETE Interventions in the custody and the community: Making an impact on Desistance from Crime*" shows that there is a strong base of research to suggest a correlation between ETE and reduced reoffending rates. Her report notes that "ETE supports self-efficacy and the development of a 'pro-social' sense of self, which in turn results in measurable reductions in reoffending rates". Much of the available research is based upon US data, however the UK and Canada has also produced empirical research showing a strong correlation between ETE and reduced reoffending rates.

Dr Dominey suggests there are still gaps in the research base and she has highlighted the need for two important changes:

Firstly, she notes that we should widen the foundations of research to look at how ETE impacts different cohorts. Existing research focuses heavily on outcomes for men participating in ETE programmes in a prison environment. Dr Jane Dominey suggests that further research could be done to assess interventions that support females in custody and also interventions that work for different cohorts in different environments, for example ETE programmes in the community or interventions that support self-employment opportunities.

Secondly, she believes it would be useful to commit to research projects with longer follow-up periods so that we can assess the long-term success rates of those who complete ETE programmes compared with those who do not.

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

Historically SEND strategies for people in custody have focused on the wrong ambitions. For too long, the measure of success has been too simplistic. The aim has been to ensure that learners with identified SEND achieve at the same rate as their peers without considering whether individuals are achieving at the level of their full potential. For individuals with severe dyslexia or information processing disorders for example, achievement may not be gaining an English qualification, but perhaps harnessing their creative talents in an entrepreneurial capacity or building and developing confidence after years of low self-esteem. Each individual journey, particularly with SEND, will be very different.

Many of our SEND learners were children who had been through the care system and have demonstrated behavioural issues. To give one example, we worked with a resident at HMP Norwich.

He had been in and out of prison for 10 years and had demonstrated physical violence towards prison officers on a number of occasions. For many years no-one had looked into the issues that were causing these behavioural issues. Following initial and detailed SEND screening which involved discussing his background, it turned out he was a survivor of abuse and his mother had been attacked when pregnant causing him to suffer a brain injury. The injury had not been registered for over a decade, neither had a range of other adverse childhood experiences he had. Following the assessment, we have been able to work with him and begin the long process of recovery. For this resident, the work we do with him will focus on developing him and building him up rather than focusing on whether he meets the expected path of 'non-SEND' learners.

To ensure we are providing the most appropriate provision for SEND learners we reach out to local authorities to ascertain whether the individual has been awarded an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), thus ensuring that those individuals have appropriate support in place. A three-tiered system has been developed to categorise the different level of SEND needs amongst residents. This allows the right type of support to be provided to learners with the most complex needs.

Extensive employee training has taken place and continues to be developed based on emerging data trends.

We have continued to work with Awarding Organisations, such as City and Guilds, to ensure that our learners benefit from the same reasonable adjustments during assessments as learners in the community. An example of this would be allowing the use of Reading Pens to support accessibility.

We have also proposed a trial project at one of the eastern region prisons with an ambition to develop a whole prison approach to SEND. The aims of the project are as follows:

- To raise the ambition and aspirations of Learning Disability or Difficulty (LDD) residents within the prison estate and promote social mobility.
- To successfully support high ability LDD residents in achieving positive outcomes in Education.
- To successfully embed an 'enabling culture' in relation to LDD within the whole prison environment.
- To support all staff within the prison environment so they are better able to meet the needs of residents with LDD needs.
- To transform outcomes for residents with LDD needs, by supporting professionals to bring about a culture and behaviour change around effective LDD.

One of the areas where prison tends to have a 'blind spot' is the extent to which the role of the arts can support positive outcomes in rehabilitation, particularly in relation to the development of important 'softer skills' or communication skills. PeoplePlus has worked successfully with a number of arts organisations, including the Irene Taylor Trust and Synergy Theatre Project, to deliver really positive outcomes for learners, including those with SEND.

Case Study One

In Littlehey Prison, PeoplePlus has worked with the Irene Taylor Trust to run music workshops which boost skills develop and self-esteem.

Professional musicians act as workshop facilitators to support groups of approximately 10 people and work with them to help them write, produce, record and perform 5 pieces of music from scratch using a whole band's worth of instruments. Each participant comes away with a professionally produced CD of their work, with copies sent to their families or loved ones. This is a tremendously powerful thing for these learners, giving them a sense of achievement and pride in their achievement.

Often, participants have had no prior musical experience. They are coached throughout a week-long programme to build confidence and resilience. They learn to overcome barriers, act on critical feedback and develop many skills that are vital to the world of work, including effective communication skills (an particularly important skill for many people with SEND), problem solving skills, team building and presentation skills. Many of the pieces of music produced have won cash prizes in the Koestler Awards.

The workshop's reputation has spread at Littlehey and it has had wider benefits for the prison, fostering improved self-esteem and behaviour on the wings. It is now a standout event in the prison's calendar.

Case Study Two

Synergy Theatre Project at HMP The Mount is a project with the same ethos. It offers play writing courses and acting courses over ten weeks.

The script writing courses culminate in each participant's work being performed by professional actors at the end of the course. Each year, the company performs the best work at The Royal Court Theatre in London.

Many participants have never written anything like a play and the sense of pride and achievement that they feel at the end, having their pieces performed by professionals is worth easily as much as a vocational qualification in construction. As part of this programme, Synergy mentors participants and also works with a number of participants on their release.

One of their mentees wrote "The Special Relationship", a production which was shown for six-weeks at The Soho Theatre in 2020, before lockdown. The production went on to win at the Black Theatre Awards. The playwright had not previously written anything and is now a major award-winning writer.

There is tremendous creative potential within the prison setting, but in such a challenging environment it can be overlooked by policy and decision makers. Often, the arts are categorised as 'a nice to do' rather than incorporated as credible and highly effective way of reducing reoffending and increasing employment chances.

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

Skills delivery in prisons has, in the past, tended to focus on traditional professions or services such as building, warehousing or customer service qualifications. A close working relationship with education providers and the prison's Heads of Learning and Skills means that there is now a stronger alignment between education provision and local employment need. At PeoplePlus, we use EMSI Labour Market data mapped against each prison's release area. We match skills provision to vacancies and local skills gaps. An important element of success lies in the development and maintenance of strong working relationships with a range of employers in the release areas. There are great examples of good practice with employers such as Veolia, Timpsons and North Midlands Construction - to name but a few – where interviews are undertaken whilst the learner is still in custody so that they can move directly into secure employment on release.

During COVID-19 we continue to build employer links as a priority, understanding their needs as they navigate through this challenging operating environment. We have invested in a dedicated employer relations team with a remit to maximise the opportunities available to residents when they leave custody. It is important to note that within the prison system there is an incredible pool of talent that employers can and indeed, should benefit from.

In order to maximise the opportunities for employers and for individuals leaving the criminal justice system, one of the most important shifts we can make is to ‘future proof’ prison education so that it keeps pace with technological shifts and the growth of the global digital economy. Advancements such as the widespread use of artificial intelligence (ai) will have a profound effect on the shape of our workforce and the employment opportunities that are available to every UK citizen.

To ensure prison education is ‘future-proofed’, we believe there is a requirement for a stronger focus on digital learning right across the prison estate. It would be beneficial for the prison system as a whole to consider how it can upgrade digital skills training. Many ITC courses are basic with multi-media provision often only available at entry level.

How can successful participation in education be incentivised in prisons?

We would recommend one clear action to improve participation levels which is to “lose the classroom”.

For a very significant proportion of the prison population, a classroom represents failure and a negative experience. Asking prisoners to willingly return to that experience is often met with a sense of fear, rejection or resentment.

By redesigning educational spaces to replicate an office environment or perhaps by creating skills centres where the focus is purely on developing relevant skills for the workplace, the ‘school’ stigma would be replaced with a more positive association.

The second factor which impacts participation, as highlighted by Dr Jane Dominey in her report, is that payment for attending education classes needs to be considered against the payrates that can be earned for wing-based jobs or workshop employment. Whilst this is obviously a matter for the Prison Service Heads of Reducing Re-offending and Heads of Learning and Skills, we would recommend that this is reviewed. The review could also take into consideration whether the use of bonuses could incentivise bespoke education and employment routes for learners.

In line with our view that digital skills training and capability needs to be enhanced within the prison environment, in 2021 we believe that the advancement of eLearning opportunities and developments of IT should be prioritised. This would ensure prisoners could make similar progress to those who are in mainstream education.

How might apprenticeships work for those in prison education?

We are supportive of the principle and believe that approaches can be found. We are currently in discussions with Ministry of Justice about apprenticeships and how best to build awareness of apprenticeship opportunities.

Are current resources for prison learning meeting need?

Digital capability is restricted across the prison estate, but we have invested extensively in services that replicate the online environment so that we can ‘bring the internet’ into the classroom whilst remaining offline and secure.

This provision has transformed the way we deliver content to residents. For example, we run a service called Wayout TV, an in-cell communications channel that allows the Governor to communicate with the residents as well as providing them with information in a format which is educational and entertaining. The content covers the broad range of provision from functional skills through to Level 2 and 3.

Our digital Way2Learn programme offers bite-size learning to support functional and ICT skills. This has been incredibly important in supporting progression beyond through the gate, particularly for

those individuals who have served long sentences, where the digital economy looks very different to the way it did at the start of their sentence.

Learn-It-Now is a mixed level series which encourages the viewer to think again about maths, english and vocational (workshop) studies. Many learners do not feel able to join traditional ‘classroom’ based activities because of either peer pressure, confidence or the lack of basic skills. This series aims to encourage those back into education by enabling them to complete short tutorials in-cell to improve their basic understanding of these subjects.

The Knowledge slot of programmes covers a range of subjects from history, science and philosophy and is supported with content from The Royal Institution, Gresham College, The Open University and The School of Life. It is aimed at students who require Level 2 and 3 type learning.

To make sure it is appealing to our audience, we’ve partnered with many like-minded content providers from the UK and around the world to provide a varied mix of programming aimed at all ages and abilities. For example, ‘*YourTube*’ is curated content from our partners on YouTube – exactly the kind of ‘brain food’ they might watch online if they had the internet, thus replicating ‘online’ video education in an offline world.

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

The quality of education provision for every single learner is incredibly important to us. It is their future that we are supporting and is at the heart of everything we do. Our overall aim is to drive outstanding education provision. As such, we are committed to principles of effective and transparent review of our service delivery.

The approach we use at PeoplePlus is to develop and maintain comprehensive quality baselines which underpin our provision and values. These are built around the Education Inspection Framework and HMIP’s Expectations criteria to endorse standards.

Our quality baselines are published to stakeholders, staff and learners covering:

- Course induction and learner documentation
- Assessment and internal quality assurance procedures
- Appeals and complaints procedure
- Learning support
- Learner voice
- Observation of teaching, learning and assessment
- Continuous professional development standards
- Staff performance management
- Self-assessment and quality improvement planning

Our performance is monitored and reviewed on a monthly basis with MoJ contract managers and quality leads. These are productive and helpful discussions with continuous improvement at their heart for sharing practice, monitoring and challenging processes and reviewing quality standards.

If for any reason we, or our stakeholders, identify that standards are not being met we address and reaffirm action points, targets and milestones as part of our Continuous Improvement Plan process.

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

The variability of the prison estate can lead to differences in learning experience and opportunity. Some prisons have limited space for vocational learning and poor classroom facilities. One of the

things that could be considered is whether learners could transfer to prisons that best facilitate their occupational aspirations.

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

Private prisons do have more autonomy over budget and tend to be better equipped. That said, in both private and public sector establishments, there is more that can be done to improve 'learning tech' solutions so that we have up to date and future proofed digital skills provision. Some simple steps could be taken to improve provision – such as allowing tutors to use an 'offline' basic tablet. This would improve the learning experience without introducing a security risk for the prison.

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

Functional skills are the same qualification across all prisons. This means that learners can continue with the qualification if they move sites and it also allows them to continue upon release as they are recognised qualifications. This is also the same for most of the vocational subjects.

We do have a concern that learners in local prisons often fail to complete qualifications such as functional skills and we would recommend a way of improving recognition of other skills gained whilst in custody. For example, the learner progress made could be shared with community Skills Centres through the use of digital portfolios.

Where there is a transient population, we would argue that education provision has been responsive. For example, shorter, more employment specific courses are available. These are designed to drive a quick shift in attitude and behaviour to encourage positive outcomes.

As a final point, COVID-19 has created many challenges for the delivery of prison education, but it has also brought some new ways of collaborative working with positive benefits. During COVID, we used Wayout TV extensively to provide mental health support to the residents. We have worked hard to adapt our learning provision with completely new, in-cell learning resources and study packs. In creating those learning resources, we have increased the level to which we share best practice between different prison estates. With less time spent physically in the prison environment, our tutors and prison educators have used Microsoft Teams to share ideas/best practice and ways of working across different regions, reshaping our working practices in a positive way.

-Ends-

January 2021