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Education Committee call for evidence on Prison Education – Teesside University Submission

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As a group of criminologists, we have experience working in collaboration with HMPPS in the delivery of a Higher Education in our local prison HMP Holme House and have set up and supported a reading group within HMP Kirkclevington Grange. In addition, we are prison researchers and have carried out research studies in both the male and female estate. Our expertise sits within the research team titled Co-producing Alcohol, Criminal Justice and Public Health Research within the Centre for Social Innovation in the School for Social Science, Humanities and Law. Within this we have a prisons special interest group that includes both academic staff, researchers and PhD students and to ensure we can feed into the national debate's around imprisonment, we are aligned with the British Society of Criminology Prison Research Network.

1. Introduction and context

- 1.1. Founded in the 1930s to support the skills needs of the local engineering and shipping industries, Teesside University is a multidisciplinary institution that has been at the heart of higher education and skills in Tees Valley for almost 90 years.
- 1.2. Teesside University is situated in Middlesbrough, in the Tees Valley. Although a small locality, the region has a considerable impact on the UK economy, with economic assets of national significance.
- 1.3. However, it also faces a number of persistent challenges including low levels of participation in the labour market, underperformance in relation to education and skills and an ageing workforce population.
- 1.4. Currently, more than 50% of all local skills shortages in the Tees Valley are concentrated in high skilled occupations and although there will be new jobs across a range of levels (including entry level jobs offered as part-time opportunities and apprenticeships), low skills remain a significant barrier to employment in the region.

- 1.5. As an anchor institution Teesside University is committed to transforming lives of the communities we serve and works in partnership with key institutions, authorities and businesses across the region to encourage lifelong learning and support the acquisition of higher-level skills.
- 1.6. Our experience of Prison Education via a partnership between Teesside University 'Inside-Out' Prison Exchange and HMP Holme House (a category C prison), in operation since September 2016 as well as delivery of a prison-based reading group in HMP Kirklevington Grange (a category D prison).
- 1.7. Our experience of carrying out prison research across both the male and female estate has focused on drug recovery, security, reducing drug supply, prison officer well-being, procedural justice and alcohol brief interventions. Within all of this work it is clear that the role of education should be at the centre of rehabilitation.
- 1.8. The university welcomes the focus this inquiry places on prison education and we would advocate for the centrality of it in all secure settings.

2. Purpose of education in prison

- 2.1. We wholly support the assessment of the role of prison education suggested by Dame Sally Coates (2016), as a potential 'engine of rehabilitation'. However, within the prison system there can be difficulty ensuring that everyone has access to appropriate education despite the evidence that people who do, are more likely to gain employment and experience improved social reintegration (Torrijo & De Maeyer, 2019).
- 2.2. Our experience demonstrates that education potential is multi-dimensional: providing learners with meaning and interest, giving insight into educational pathways and personal potential; re-building confidence and pro-social skills and encouraging deeper, more personal change and a sense of hope in the future.
- 2.3. The provision of appropriate educational experiences has been shown to reduce recidivism and in addition, the provision of higher education can build peer support and prosocial connections on release (Pelletier & Evans, 2019). The model of learning utilised within 'Inside-Out' moves beyond traditional didactic teaching methods, including more student-centered approaches, which encourage dialogue between inside (the men in the prison) and outside students (university students).

- 2.4. The creation of an egalitarian and open forum is at the heart of the approach, as is the emphasis on experiential learning. Our experience tells us that there is an appetite for more creative approaches to teaching and learning within the prison estate, particularly as many inside learners have negative or exclusionary experiences of formal educational approaches.
- 2.5. In terms of the purpose of prison education, bringing creative forms of education into a prison context has highlighted that a focus on personal growth and change within a shared learning experience can have a place alongside vocational or basic skills education. In terms of benefit, collaboration with outside learners can bring a sense of normalcy and mitigate some of the negative aspects of the prison regime whilst building a critical sense of community and belonging.

3. Current resource levels for prison education

- 3.1. Based upon our experiences of delivering higher educational initiatives within the prison estate, we suggest there is currently, limited capacity for inside learners to access higher educational programmes. Despite there being a long history of higher educational involvement in the prison estate and a recent proliferation of university - prison partnerships, programmes such as Inside-Out remain the exception in terms of educational provision and have yet to become integrated within the sector or supported via current funding mechanisms. Limitations on access to digital technology also place barriers to learning and engagement.
- 3.2. We know that prisoners can experience difficulty accessing funding for Higher Education unless they are within 6 years of the end of their sentence (Akpabio-Klementowski, 2020).
- 3.3. We recognise that there is a difficult balance between the provision of lower-level qualifications delivered to people with few, if any, qualifications, and the need to provide appropriate support for people who are unable to read or write. Despite this we would argue that the provision of higher education has an important role to play in rehabilitation and can significantly improve a person's life chances.

4. Impact of variability in the prison estate and infrastructure impact on learning

- 4.1. The wider benefits of education to the individual and the prison are well documented but from our research we know that there can be a number of barriers that can prevent people in prison from engaging with education.

- 4.2. The variability of the prison estate, combined with complex internal operational and security arrangements, impact upon learners' experiences as well as the delivery of educational programmes within the prison estate. In delivering Inside-Out, we often experienced barriers and challenges because of these institutional structures. We of course recognise that prisons are complex organisations but call for greater commitment to embedding all forms of educational provision within the regime in order to enhance engagement and participation in learning.
- 4.3. From our experience as prison researchers, we know that the movement of people between prisons can disrupt their engagement with education and lead some to resist it all together. Our work in the female estate demonstrated that women were reluctant to start an education course because they were concerned that they could be moved and would therefore need to start again. This barrier could be reduced by ensuring that where appropriate people have clear pathways through education that is embedded in their sentence planning.
- 4.4. Ensuring that people in open conditions have access to education programmes is essential because at this point in their sentence people are more focused on plans for the future, and therefore are likely to benefit from the opportunity to engage in education.

5. Summary and recommendations

We would argue that the role of education needs to be explored in more depth to ensure that appropriate opportunities are available for people within the prison system. We recognise the constraints, and acknowledge the challenges that can reduce the ability of the prison service to provide this, but we suggest that investment in education would bring benefits for individuals, communities and the wider society.

5.1. We would recommend the following:

- A commitment to enhancing access to education at all levels as well as a richer and more creative curriculum, both in terms of the content of programmes as well as methods of delivery.
- Explore partnerships between Prisons and Higher Educational providers that have the potential to contribute to the provision of higher education, meeting their need to enhance the civic role of Universities.
- The need for greater access to digital technology within the prison estate to facilitate individual and collaborative learning, as well as provide flexibility in models of delivery.

- A commitment to addressing the many logistical and operational issues involved in delivering all types of education within the prison setting.
- A commitment to embed education within sentence planning that goes beyond basic skills and includes higher education where appropriate

6. References

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March 2021