

Written evidence Submitted by Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA)

Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) submission to Education Committee Inquiry on Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning

July 2020

The Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The PLA is a network of organisations and individuals with an interest and expertise in prison education. We use our collective voice to advocate for improvements and we hold the government to account by monitoring prison education. We have over 150 members, across the sector including education providers, professional bodies and voluntary sector organisations. The Prisoners' Education Trust provide our secretariat.

The key points of this submission are:

- 1) The prison population has *very significant educational needs, above average levels*. measures taken by HMPPS during Covid have led to no face-to-face education being in place and resource levels are inadequate
- 2) Meeting these needs is advantageous for individuals, but also for the prison community, and for society more generally. Reducing recidivism and enabling prisoners to move into employment and reintegrate into society is a win-win game, with very big long-term gains.
- 3) The PLA is advocating for change in the following areas:
 - Enabling wide-scale access to digital learning materials and supporting digital literacy within prisons.
 - Improved vocational and technical education in prison, support with employability and better links with employers
 - Developing links with FE colleges and support for prisons and colleges to do this
 - Implementing an apprenticeship scheme for prisoners
- 4) The PLA's vision for education

Educational needs of prisoners and loss of taught education in prisons during Covid

The prison population stands at around 80,000. Some prisoners are well educated but a disproportionate number have low levels of literacy (62%) which is four times higher than in the general population and there are even lower levels of numeracy. Around 47% of people entering prison have no prior qualifications. Nearly two-thirds (59%) of prisoners have truanted from school, and 42% were expelled or permanently excluded from school. Many prisoners have experienced little or no success in school. Others may have been successful but lack the current skills needed, for employment or citizenship. People who have been out of society for a

period will find it very difficult to reintegrate if they are left ill-equipped generally, and especially if they are unfamiliar with technological changes.

Despite the clear benefits of prison education, there has been a decline in the number of people participating in education and in achieving qualifications in recent years. The numbers of English and Maths qualifications achieved fell by 29% between 2011/12 and 2017/18. Around 78,000 people participated in some form of prison education in 2017/18, (the latest year with available figures).

The PLA has recently published a [major study of leadership](#) as it relates to prison education, sponsored by the Further Education Trust for Leadership. We found that leadership is underdeveloped in prison education. Although there are some good training opportunities these are not systematic and not offered enough early enough in peoples' careers. Good leadership is essential for good practice, and the report made several recommendations for strengthening leadership and learning in prisons at different levels, including improving training for prison staff generally.

Despite all the difficulties, many prison educators do an excellent job, with a wonderful range of imaginative initiatives. There is not enough resource or effort committed to upscaling these initiatives, so that good practice becomes more widespread. We would urge a commitment to identifying and disseminating good practice, with evaluation as an integral component.

Education funding has stayed at the same level for the last five years (approx. £129 million), and has been guaranteed at the current level for the life of current contract, 2019–2023. Funding was allocated to the Department for Education as ring-fenced provision by HM Treasury in the Spending Review of 2015, and was transferred to Ministry of Justice via machinery-of-government changes in 2016–17.

The Treasury had asked the Ministry of Justice to review spending on education services at the end of 2019–20, following an assessment of the new contracts but we believe that this was derailed by the General Election. While recent government announcements have committed to additional funding for further education, training and apprenticeships, prison education has not been included in this.

The Covid Crisis further compounds the challenges prison education faces. While this inquiry is much wider than Covid, we do want to reiterate that it is four months since lockdown was imposed in prisons. While infections have been limited, this has come at a heavy price. Prisoners are being held in what amounts to solitary confinement and no face-to-face rehabilitative work or teaching has taken place. The lack of ICT and any kind of internet access also puts prisoners at greater disadvantage than any other educational sector.

Given the evidence of the impact education has on future life chances after release, on employment and on reoffending, delays in restoring educational opportunities to even pre-lockdown levels are vastly damaging. Schools, FE colleges and universities are all well advanced in plans for full reopening (albeit with social distancing measures) for September. Prison education, serving as it does some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged in society, is at the back of this queue. We

would urge the committee to do all that you can to hold HMPPS to account on progressing recovery in prison.

Benefits of prison learning

Our previous research has clearly shown the value of learning. Our Theory of Change [report](#) demonstrated that prison education builds wellbeing for individual learners alongside developing human capital and motivation to change, social capital, active engagement and increasing knowledge skills and employability.

And - many prisoners are clear about the benefits of prison learning – and the kind of learning they want. The Prison Reform Trust recently published a [report](#) about making best use of time in prisons. They received responses from 1250 prisoners. Alongside safety and a consistent regime, they found that

‘prisoners want education that stretches the mind and delves deep, training that bestows industry recognised qualifications, the opportunity to use the skills they came in to prison with, and work experience that makes them attractive to future employers. Prisoners want the breadth of the education, employment and training offer to be increased, and to make better use of technology so that prisoners can access educational materials, maintain family contact, and find information about outside agencies on which they will rely in future. Connection with wider society, a desire to be reintegrated and not forgotten about came through as a priority.’

Offering meaningful occupation and activity that is truly purposeful also benefits the safety of the prison environment. Research shows support for the hypothesis that adult academic and vocational correctional education programs lead to fewer disciplinary violations, reductions in recidivism, increases in employment opportunities, and to an increase in participation in education upon release.¹

Alongside the impact on the prison environment and the impact on the individual, the significant impact of prison education is the reduction in reoffending. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated quantitatively the positive effects of participation in learning on recidivism. Engagement with education can significantly reduce reoffending. The proven on year reoffending rate is 34% for prisoner learners, compared to 43% for people who not engaged in learning.

The benefits accrue to the individual, but also to their family (including the educational performance of their children) and to the community. *Crime and Lifelong Learning* was one of the main themes of the 2010 Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning, and included analysis of the public value/SROI of prison learning. One meta-analysis of a variety of interventions showed a saving to the taxpayer of around £19K per former prisoner, excluding savings from fewer victim costs. Broader educational effects, e.g. on expanded communicative skills or enhanced

¹ Gaes et al. 1999:411).

self-confidence, are harder to estimate but undoubtedly exist. There is a mass of evidence, which cannot be simply quantified.

Digital technology and digital literacy

Prisons face very difficult times. They have been under-resourced and over-crowded for many years. The Covid-19 crisis has posed acute problems for everyone – governors, staff, prisoners and their families. Improving access to learning is one way of providing hope and improving morale, and therefore security. Even before the crisis the PLA's priority, supported across our membership, was for better access to digital learning. This is greatly accentuated by the universal shift to online communication and learning in the world outside. Blended learning, combining face-to-face with digital, will be much more prominent in the future. The PLA's very recent briefing, [the Digital Divide](#) provides detail, together with examples from other countries. Its main conclusions are that HMPPS should develop and implement a national strategy to ensure that there is a single consistent secure infrastructure. Where possible, the education platform should support wider functionality linked to the prison intranet, so that prisoners can access information on their prison account. It also recommends that In-cell devices become the norm and an automatic entitlement, removed only in exceptional circumstances.

The digital revolution has largely passed prisons by. Digital literacy has now acquired the same status as literacy and numeracy in education. However, prison education departments will struggle to provide the teaching and qualifications needed without further investment into technology, tutor support and training and a reduction in the current restrictions on internet and intranet access.

Technical/vocational education and employment

Prisons also have to compete with community colleges for high quality staff to teach vocational subjects. High quality vocational teaching is currently a challenge across the whole of FE as using (rather than teaching) a trade attracts a higher salary. There are some good examples of prisons and education providers providing vocational training linked to labour market gaps. However, too much vocational education and training in prisons is undertaken without an understanding of potential impact on future employment. Providers are sometimes reluctant to change courses because of difficulties recruiting teachers/instructors and an unwillingness to create redundancies. Ideally, the current workforce would be upskilled and diversified.

There are currently very few industry standard vocational qualifications at Level 3 offered and while the new contracting arrangements give Governors the discretion to commission this, few have taken this opportunity. Vocational education should include delivery of core employment skills as part of preparation for release, including training on disclosing convictions, and employer engagement and

brokerage function and employ offenders on release. Training and transferable work skills to need be better embedded into prison industry.

The new T (Technical) levels, expected to be rolled out from September 2020, and providing another route to industry-recognised qualifications, could also provide prisoners with meaningful work experience, skills and qualifications. However, there is currently no information available about whether T levels will be available to prison learners.

Improved engagement with employers is vital to ensure that vocational training in prison and basic skills qualifications that prisoners gain while inside reflects employer needs. Prisoners must be supported effectively to find jobs on release.

The New Futures Network is a welcome initiative, and we have seen many positive examples of employers with positive recruitment practices for former prisoners. (Timpson, Railtrack). But the approach is too piecemeal and government incentives and support for employers, (such as the cut to National Insurance contributions to incentivise employers to employ veterans) should be considered.

ROTL (release on temporary licence), when a security cleared prisoner can access day release for the purposes of work or education is [hugely underutilised](#). There is no central strategy to increase day release for prisoner students. There are also no centrally collated figures for prisoners who are regularly accessing college or university courses in the community. Although we are aware that a few open prisoners have extremely good links with local education providers, this remains rare.

The need for advice about accessing ETE on release is immense. Data shows that [10.5% of prison leavers between April 2018 and March 2019](#) were in employment six weeks later. The number of people in work a year after leaving prison is higher, at 17%, but not high enough. Every year, around 70,000 people leave prison. Although we know that at least 58,000 of them are not in employment one year after release, we know surprisingly little about their outcomes.²

Nine percent of prison leavers last year were unavailable for work because of illness, disability or care responsibilities and, nearly a fifth of the data (18%) is missing. This leaves over 40,000 people – 62% who are counted as unemployed. But some of these people will be involved in training, doing courses or volunteering. We would like to see these figures collected and collated.

Prisoners and further education

Our [report on leadership](#) found extremely few partnerships between further education colleges and prisons. Having four key contracted education providers education means that local referral routes and partnerships are rare. Governors and

² The 10.5% figure in employment covers anybody who is in paid work; whether full time or part time, temporary or permanent, in apprenticeships, or self-employed

leaders in prison education were clear that they would welcome input from their local further education colleges.

It is vital that Heads of Learning and Skills have links and referral processes in place with local colleges. This would enable different kinds of opportunities for learners, including access to courses delivered by FE staff at the prison as well as applying for courses to start post-release. The report highlights how a lack of investment in prison education, including in the professional and leadership development of prison education staff, has negatively impacted on the ability of prison departments to make effective links with local FE colleges, describing these missing links as 'a massive missed opportunity' for prison learners.

Prison learning should be seen in the wider context of lifelong learning. Some universities do excellent work in partnership with prisons and this is to be encouraged. FE colleges are natural providers, both for serving and former prisoners; severely underfunded for the past decade, few of them are able to play an active role in relation to prison learning. We urge that colleges be given sufficient resources, and support to engage with prisons as part of their commitment to local communities, providing education in prison but also opportunities for prisoners to engage in learning when they leave prison. This would be a significant step in enabling reintegration.

Apprenticeships – for prison staff, prisoners and former prisoners

We are pleased that HMPPS has implemented an apprenticeship scheme alongside the recruitment strategy to recruit more officers. In March 2020, the MOJ Apprenticeship Strategy reported an increase in apprenticeship starts from 2018-2019 by 31% and this was expected to continue with significant officer recruitment throughout 2020/21. The Covid crisis has meant that the apprenticeship strategy has been paused in the short term, but we are pleased that there are plans in place to start operational apprenticeships again quickly when it is safe to do so.

All new operational support grades are strongly encouraged to take a level 2 apprenticeship and there are plans for all new prison officers to undertake level 3 apprenticeship from January 2021. Apprenticeships span a broad range of professional and operational areas and a range of qualifications from level two up to level 7. We believe this is a positive step forward for training prison staff and we welcome this development.

However, plans to implement an apprenticeship scheme for former prisoners have not been so successful. The MoJ's 2018 Education and Employment Strategy set out the Prisoner Apprenticeship Pathway as a vocational route to gaining qualifications and work experience, part of the government's aim to create three million apprenticeships by 2020. So far, however, no progress has been made in implementing the pathway across the prison estate.³ The hope was that learners engaged on the pathway would receive training in prison, a 12-month apprenticeship on release, guaranteeing a job and income but no apprenticeships have been set up

³ <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2020-02-21.18578.h&s>

as yet. Last year, [an independent report](#) called for a cross-departmental approach, criticising the lack of operational detail and clarity around funding and how agencies will support apprentices.⁴ The importance of apprenticeships has only increased in the context of the Covid-19 lockdown and its likely effect on the economy. We note that in June 2020, the Prime Minister promised guaranteed apprenticeships for young people as lockdown ends⁵ and we hope this will include opportunities for young adults leaving prison.

The PLA's vision for prison education

As set out above, there is a strong base of evidence on the value of prison learning and the need to integrate this into other strategies for adult life-long learning. The [Coates review](#) of 2016 was a universally applauded exercise whose arguments are entirely relevant today. Dame Sally Coates vision was that prison education should incorporate the following:

- basic skills development in maths, English and ICT, through intensive courses, one-to-one support from other prisoners, or embedded in workshop or other work settings (e.g. kitchens and gardens)
- high quality vocational training and employability skills that prepare individuals for jobs on release (e.g. through industrial work and training designed with and for employers)
- Personal and Social Development (PSD), including behaviour programmes, family- and relationship-learning, and practical skills (e.g. parenting, finance, and domestic management)
- proper support for the needs of prisoners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD)
- provision of arts, music and sport activities
- enterprise and self-employment support and training
- self-directed study
- learning facilitated by ICT, including distance-learning that can support qualifications from entry level up to degree level
- advice and guidance that ensures individuals make informed choices about education and future employment and career options
- 'through the gate' support so that individuals can continue to progress through education, training and employment on release, and therefore avoid reoffending

Our [review](#) highlighted that progress on the recommendations in the Coates review is too slow. We are also extremely concerned about the impact of Covid on prison education and on outcomes for learners. The above framework, if implemented and fully resourced, would provide a sound basis for prisoner learners and prison leavers to reach their full potential and contribute fully to society.

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⁴ AELP & ERSA report, 2019, p. 12.

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-uk-recession-coronavirus-apprenticeships-jobs-young-people-a9547571.html>