

## Education for Offenders in Prison

M. James C. Crabbe, Department of Life Sciences, University of Bedfordshire; and Wolfson College, University of Oxford

Contact: james.crabbe@beds.ac.uk; james.crabbe@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question.

Eugène Ionesco, *Découvertes*, 1969

;

### Abstract

Prisoners are a group of people often forgotten or ignored by society as a whole. Yet recidivism – reoffending – is a serious drain on resources worldwide, and tackling it has been the subject of much research and policy development. Education in secure environments and beyond helps offenders, reduces recidivism and improves employability. Here, we address current and future pathways in offender education, involving Information Technology and offender-led learning. These issues have been studied in the Coates Review (2016), which should be an important breakthrough in improving education in prisons, and effecting culture change about prisoner education in and beyond prisons.

**Keywords:** prison, recidivism, skills, employability, Coates Review, offending

### Introduction: education and the cycle of offending and re-offending (recidivism)

The ‘classic’ view of education, at least in the UK, is of a unilinear mode of progression, from nursery/kindergarten -> prep/primary -> secondary -> university/conservatoire/art school -> post graduate-research or the professions. Further Education (FE), or skills and vocational training, feature only as ‘second class’ alternatives to University. Yet the ‘skills gap’ in the UK is as wide as it was in the 1960s. Addressing this issue takes us into novel approaches in education, not least the education for offenders in prison. This article develops the idea that an enquiry- and skills-based approach to education, successful in schools and colleges, could be of considerable use in prisons. The release from prison of appropriately educated offenders should not only reduce re-offending rates, but also help to close the ‘skills’ gap’ in the UK.

Education at primary level, between the ages of about 5 and 11 years, is critical to the formation of mental processes, knowledge and skills. The aspirational nature of a young person’s early environment is also important, both to the individual and to society as a whole. For example, in the UK, over 200,000 children have one or more parents in prison, and 65% of the children of those parents who have offended go on to offend themselves (Ministry of Justice, 2014). In the U.S., where at year-end 2011, a total of 6,977,700 adults were under correctional supervision (probation, parole, jail, or prison) – about 2.9% of adults in the U.S. resident population (U.S. Bureau of Statistics) – this effect could be even more significant. Such major trends are not just the consequence of formal teaching during childhood, but reflect the way in which a young person’s social environment and physical experience influence their attitudes and beliefs.

37% of 1,435 new prisoners in England and Wales reported having family members who had been convicted of a non-motoring criminal offence, of whom 84% had been in prison, a young offenders’ institution or borstal. Prisoners with a convicted family member were more likely to be reconvicted in the year after release from custody than those without a convicted family member (Williams *et al.*, 2012).

In any one month, around 85,000 people are in prison, while annually, more than 200,000 are on probation (Ministry of Justice, 2012). In some settings, e.g. in the Youth Offender Institutions, the aim is to screen all offenders for low literacy and numeracy levels on admission to custody, although the picture is more variable across adult prisons, where screening and education provision is more voluntary or patchy. Offenders on community orders are screened for learning needs as part of pre-sentence activity and/or while on supervision. Statistics show that needs are very high. Two-thirds of offenders in custody have numeracy skills at or below the level expected of an 11-year old. One half have a reading ability and 82% have a writing ability at or below this level (Ministry of Justice, 2012). 46% of prisoners assessed on entering prison since August 2014 have literacy skills no higher than those broadly expected

of an 11 year-old child. This is three times more than the 15% of people with similar skills levels in the adult population generally (OLASS, 2015). Also, almost a third (23,550) of those prisoners assessed self-reported having a learning difficulty or disability (OLASS, 2015). Offenders who have speaking and language skills below this level may have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) such as dyslexia or autistic spectrum disorders, which make communication particularly challenging for them. This lack of skills is a barrier to the offender getting a job and plays a significant role in the possibility of re-offending (Clarke, 2010). Inability to communicate adequately can result in aggression and frustration. A lack of awareness of their own and others' communication skills, such as poor body language, can mean that offenders may appear to others as aggressive when this is not the intention.

### **Education helps offenders and reduces recidivism**

Addressing the challenge of re-offending is central to HM Government's offender learning strategy. Statistics indicate that 60% of offenders re-offend within two years at a cost to the taxpayer of c. £9.5 - £13 billion per year (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Contributing factors to this problem include negative attitudes and behaviours and pre-existing issues of limited education and training present prior to offending.

Prison inmates in the U.S. who receive general education and vocational training are significantly less likely to return to prison after release and are more likely to find employment than peers who do not receive such opportunities (Davis *et al.*, 2013). The findings, from the largest-ever meta-analysis of correctional educational studies, suggest that prison education programs are cost effective. Using a hypothetical pool of 100 inmates, the three-year reincarceration costs for those who did not receive correctional education would be between \$2.94 million and \$3.25 million. In comparison, for those who did receive correctional education, the three-year reincarceration costs would be between \$2.07 million and \$2.28 million. This means that reincarceration costs are \$0.87 million to \$0.97 million less for those who receive correctional education. Inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43% lower odds of recidivating than those who did not. This translates to a reduction in the risk of recidivating of 13 percentage points. It may also improve their chances of obtaining employment after release. The odds of obtaining employment post-release among inmates who participated in correctional education was 13% higher than the odds for those who did not participate in correctional education.

In the UK, a report (Justice Data Lab, 2015) analysed education in prisons funded by the Prisoners' Education Trust (PET), which provides funding to enable prisoners to undertake a wide range of learning. The analysis of nearly 6,000 prisoner records found that PET's beneficiaries re-offended a quarter less than the control group (19% compared to 26%, a reduction of between 5 and 8%). PET has established the Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) to bring together diverse non-statutory stakeholders to inform future priorities, policies and practices relating to prison education, learning and skills. Membership includes the Directors of the Prison Radio Association, the Open University, the National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice, NIACE (National Voice for Lifelong-Learning), the Education and Training Foundation, the Shannon Trust, and the Prison Governors Association.

### **Developing communication skills for offenders**

Good communication skills for offenders returning to the community are central to new and successful lives and new chances. Effective speaking and listening skills are essential to entering and sustaining work. Employers identify good communication skills as highly important to their operation. The opportunity to work offers opportunity for change. This not only supports the offender but their families and the community at large. However, improving communication skills may not rank highly on the offender's priority list. 'Selling' the idea of developing speaking and listening skills can be a hard task. Offenders need to realise that communication skills are a vital part of resettlement and considerably improve job opportunities.

Some of the key speaking and listening skills needed in most places of work include: Asking questions, Responding to questions from colleagues and customers, Following verbal instructions, Talking to and collaborating with colleagues on work-related activities using appropriate and polite language, Taking instructions and messages and passing them on to colleagues, and Contributing to meetings, training sessions and reviews (Wye, 2012).

Education in English and Maths is a considerable challenge for many prisoners, and Enigma is a group of practitioners from all regions, who meet monthly, to look at how they can create and support an English and Maths improvement initiative, both in the core College and Justice sector. One example is the collaboration with the National Football Museum in Manchester, and maths/football resources have been delivered at 9 prisons and 1 youth offender institution. Feedback has been very positive.

### **Novel approaches to education in prisons**

#### **1. Sharing Effective Practice in Offender Learning Materials from Events held in February and March 2015.**

Three events held by the Education and Training Foundation launched the 'Teaching and Learning Toolkit', on the 'Offender Learning Exhibition Site', which can be accessed at: <http://offenderlearning.excellencegateway.org.uk/teaching-and-learning>. A key element is 'Effective questioning', which can reveal both deep and surface learning. Another very helpful part of this toolkit in relation to communication is the set of modules on 'Developing Speaking and Listening Skills'. In some ways, these can be seen as a very basic form of skills- and enquiry-based learning as exemplified by Open Futures in schools and colleges (Crabbe, 2014; Crabbe *et al.*, 2015).

#### **2. The Virtual Campus.**

The Virtual Campus allows access to resources to assist offenders on their journey to resettlement outside of prison. The Virtual Campus is delivered on an operational level by a partnership formed by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) through prison projects across England and Wales. A secure data-sharing platform consisting of a portal, Management Information System (MIS) and a reporting system is operated by MegaNexus Ltd.

It is designed to connect the partners across disciplines and allow them to share data and content with high security. It gives the opportunity to view relevant training courses that are available and apply directly for jobs within the relocation area. Throughout all of this the key theme is increasing the employability of ex-offenders through providing holistic through-the-gate support.

MegaNexus Ltd. has also developed 'Bring on Potential' (BOP), which allows jobseekers to search for jobs, learn through the online courses and create curricula vitae (CVs) on a secure site. The site can be accessed from all locations i.e. homes, libraries, internet cafes. The courses which have been made available through East of England, West Midlands and London Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) providers, are aimed to lead and support the jobseeker towards employment or contribute to an accredited certification. The courses give the jobseeker the opportunity for learning to occur. The CV builder will offer a step-by-step guide to building a CV which is aimed to help jobseekers who may not have built a CV before. Jobseekers have access to resources and a directory which may help them with finding a job. The resources and directory both follow the seven pathways to resettlement, which cover Behaviour, Drugs and Alcohol, Family and Relationships, Health, Housing, Money and Skills and Work. The resources contain animations and pdf files and contain information on topics such as Job Interviews, Applying for Jobs, Help with giving up smoking and Help with finding Accommodation. London Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) has a Through the Gate service in London prisons which uses a Job Readiness Banding Tool to identify what offenders need to do before they can apply for a job. In-cell provision should help offenders in prisons in the future (Knight, 2015).

#### **3. Courses and skills development, in prison and beyond.**

In 2014/15 there were 50 OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) inspections of prison and young offender institutions (Ofsted Report 2014/15). Four resulted in outstanding grades, 24 good grades, 56 requires improvement grades, and 16 inadequate grades. Learning and skills in prisons has been one of the worst performing elements in the Further Education (FE) and skills sector for some time.

To help offenders with motivation, a series of very short accredited courses, with transferable qualifications, could be taken by offenders in their institution or centre. These could then build up to qualifications that lead to courses in Further Education. The courses need not necessarily be academic, but address issues of citizenship, and they would lead to a certificate that would give the offender

confidence and widen their aspects of vision for the future. If they are shifted to other institutions, then their certifications and courses would follow them. Once they are released, their qualifications would help them get employment, and they could continue the courses outside.

This proposal would complement some of the excellent educational work which is currently carried out by highly dedicated staff with offenders, courses which are longer and often with high drop-out rates. I have seen excellent examples, including motorcycle maintenance and general carpentry and construction skills being taught in both Wandsworth and Feltham, with very good sporting facilities in those institutions. Also 'English as a Foreign Language' at Wandsworth Prison, where there is a high proportion of inmates who do not have English as their native tongue. For Senior Attendance Centres, social science and health course elements could be assembled along the lines I have seen in operation at Stratford.

#### 4. The Coates Review.

In September 2015 Justice Secretary Michael Gove ordered a review of the system of prison learning, chaired by Dame Sally Coates. One aspect of this investigates how the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) operates and tenders contracts for offender learning – currently these are given regionally to three General FE Colleges and one private provider.

The Coates review is a timely reminder that learning should be at the heart of prisons, indeed of all offender institutions. A workshop was held in December 2015 at the Ministry of Justice to discuss six themes which had become apparent to the members of the Coates' Panel since its inception:

1. Greater flexibility in course offers for offenders.
2. Greater autonomy for Prison Governors
3. Information Technology; currently it was a large barrier to improvement. Staff were very risk-averse. The Virtual Campus was often difficult to access.
4. Offenders needed to be traced after their release- 'through the gate'.
5. The variability in teaching quality in prisons was too great.
6. There needs to be access to Level 3 and Higher Education for offenders.

One major problem in education in prisons is that 'one size fits all'. This needs to change, so that prisoners can have a portfolio of educational opportunities, and need to be incentivised to undertake education. Education targets could be put within an individual's sentence plan, focused towards a release date.

Another issue is to recruit and retain good teachers. Education for offenders could be a part of Initial Teacher Training. All staff in prisons need to be aware of the importance of education, and the Education Manager in a prison should be part of the Senior Management Team. There should be joint targets for education and for security.

The Review Panel submitted its final report on May 18th 2016. It should provide a turning point for offender education, and an important step in lowering re-offending. The Prime Minister has stated that the government would accept the recommendations made in the Review.

#### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

Overall, there should be a learning culture in a prison, with a whole-prison approach to learning including learning on the wing and in-cell. Education should be part of a sentence plan and properly sequenced and structured with other interventions across a sentence and the plan should properly follow prisoners when they move. All prison staff need to be trained in the importance of education in prisons. Education should be prioritized alongside security and safeguarding so it is more influential as part of prison inspections.

These approaches need to be coupled with a culture change about offender learning with employers, and a culture change in society as a whole. Offender learning should be about values rather than about costs. Prison education needs to be inspiring and motivational and must provide links to employment and 'real life' on release.

Overall, one size in education does not fit all, whether for prisoners themselves or indeed for the prisons. There is a need to consider equalities in education provision and ensure learning appropriate for black and minority ethnic (BME) prisoners. With increasing emphasis on giving prison governors autonomy over their operations and budgets, it will be important to insure good governance of education in prisons, both at local and national levels. There will need to be an overarching governing body to oversee the governance issues of education in all the prison estates.

### References

- Coates, S. (2106) *Unlocking Potential: A review of education in prison*. Ministry of Justice.  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf)
- Crabbe, M.J.C. (2014) *Open Futures – a model for education*. The Educator, issue 36, January, pp. 17-18.
- Crabbe, M.J.C., O'Rorke, L., Egan E. and Hadawi, A. (2015) Open Futures: An Enquiry- and Skills- Based Educational Programme Developed for Primary Education, and its use in Tertiary Education. *Journal of Pedagogic Development* 5, 3-8.
- Davis, L.M., Bozick, R., Steele, J.L., Saunders, J, and Miles, J.N.V. (2013) *Education and Vocational Training in Prisons Reduces Recidivism, Improves Job Outlook*. Rand Corporation.  
[http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR266.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html)
- Justice Data Lab (2015) *Report on Education in Prisons*.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/justice-data-lab>
- Knight, V. (2015) *Some observations on the digital landscape of prisons today*. Prison Service Journal issue 220, pp. 3-9.
- Clarke, K. (2010) Green Paper *Breaking the Cycle*, Ministry of Justice, London.
- Ministry of Justice (2012) *Prison population and offender management statistics*, London.
- Ministry of Justice (2013) *Reducing re-offending and improving rehabilitation*, London.
- Ministry of Justice (2014) *Offender statistics*, London.
- OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) Annual Report 2014/15, London.  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/432859/Ofsted\\_annual\\_reports\\_accounts\\_2014-15.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/432859/Ofsted_annual_reports_accounts_2014-15.pdf)
- OLASS (2015) *English and Maths assessments: participation 2014/15*, London.
- Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V. and Booth, N (2012) *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds*. Ministry of Justice, London.  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds.pdf)
- Wye, R. (2012) *Developing Speaking and Listening Skills*. Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 176 pp. Coventry, UK. Available at: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/>.