

Life beyond bars: Learning for life after prison

BRIEFING PAPER

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This paper discusses the current state of education in prisons, and why it is failing to deliver on its aims of supporting employment and reducing reoffending.

KEY POINTS

Education is a key rehabilitation strategy, but it is not going well.

- Education is central to prisoner rehabilitation. It reduces reoffending in and of itself, and helps to secure employment after release.
- Education take-up, however, has been in decline and is still not back at even pre-pandemic levels.
- The quality of prison education has also experienced a decline. In 2023, 73% of prisons were rated as “requires improvement” or “inadequate” for their education and skills provision, up from 50% in 2019.

The issue is that education is not truly valued by prison governors or by government.

- Education is not always paid the same as work, and government doesn't think it should be, which disincentivises participation.
- For governors, education is often an afterthought. There is a narrow understanding of what education is, the education that is offered is limited in scope and achievements are not celebrated.
- Government does not encourage a broader education offering, and does not fund education sufficiently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving education requires a step change from both governors and government.

- To show they are serious about education, government should mandate that education and work are paid at the same rate.
- Funding for education should be increased, as the underfunding of education is inhibiting successful delivery.
- Governors must be incentivised by government to value education. Education should play a more significant role in prison assessments, and prisons who do education well should be rewarded.

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ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing paper is based on three roundtables organised by the Social Market Foundation across the second half of 2023, as part of the *Fresh perspectives on rehabilitation* project we undertook in partnership with AIG. The event, held under the Chatham House rule, brought together senior policymakers and experts in rehabilitation. The names of those who attended are private, but participants included senior MPs from across the political spectrum. While this paper anonymously reports some of the views expressed by seminar participants, the conclusions and recommendations made here are those of the SMF author alone.

REHABILITATION IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: THE POSITION OF EDUCATION

Education is a key rehabilitation strategy

One of the core functions of the prison system is to reduce reoffending through rehabilitation of prisoners. Reoffending begets further reoffending (i.e., once someone has one conviction, they are more likely to receive subsequent convictions), and costs the government an estimated £18 billion each year.¹ Bringing down the reoffending rate therefore not only helps make communities safer, but is beneficial to the Treasury. The government's primary strategy for reducing reoffending is through employment. Prison leavers who are in sustained employment are up to nine percentage points less likely to reoffend within their first year of release than those released who are not in employment.²

Accessing the labour market, however, is rarely plain sailing for those leaving prison. Many job applications ask about past convictions, which can deter those with convictions from applying and many employers are still hesitant about employing someone with a criminal conviction.^{3 4 5} Prisoners also tend to have lower levels of educational attainment than those not in the prison system. An estimated two-thirds of prisoners enter the secure estate with English and Maths below the level expected of an 11-year-old.⁶ Many have disrupted experiences of education, having been permanently excluded from school, and may not have any formal educational qualifications. Education therefore is the second focus of rehabilitation strategies.⁷ Engaging with education during a sentence can help prisoners to improve on their basic literacy and numeracy abilities, and develop career or job-specific skills, contributing to overcoming barriers to employment after release.

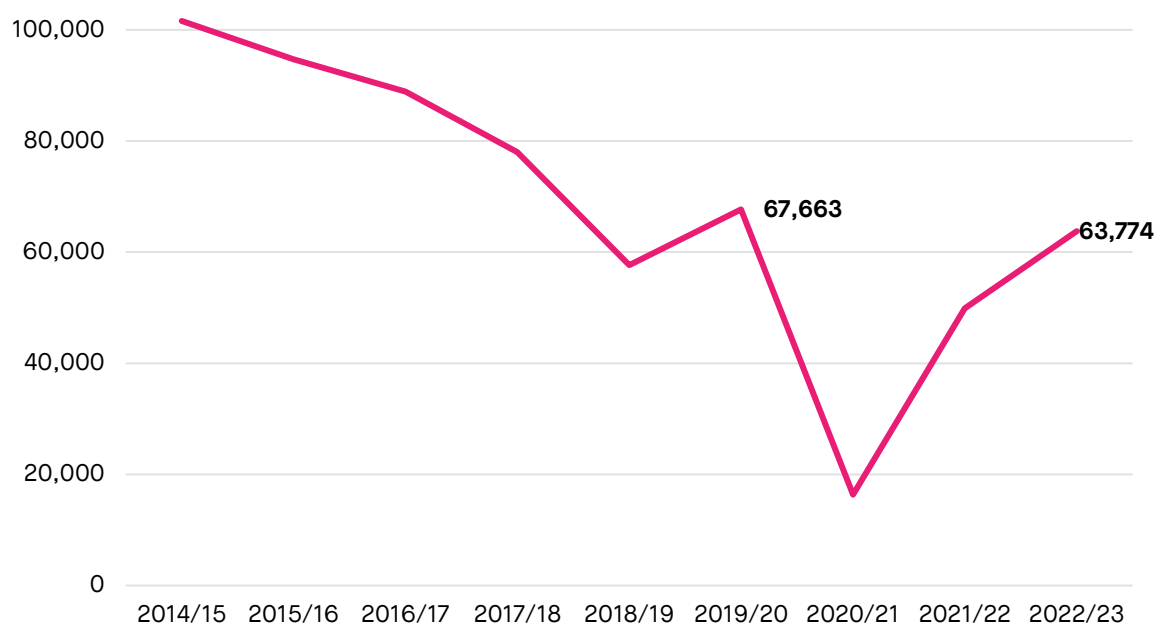
Education, however, is an important rehabilitative tool in and of itself. Those who partook in education programmes are 7.5 percentage points less likely to reoffend than those who did not, even if they are not in employment.⁸ Education is also an opportunity for personal development and growth, giving many in prison a sense of purpose, hope and direction for life after release. It has been shown to improve prisoner mental health, wellbeing and behaviour.⁹

But education in prison is not going well

Despite its many positive effects, in prison education is falling short of the mark.

From an engagement perspective, too few prisoners are taking part in education programmes while in prison. Education of course may not be a priority for all prisoners, many of whom have greater needs such as mental health and addiction issues. Others may be reluctant to engage with formal education, due to past negative experiences. But there is clearly a bigger issue here. As shown in Figure 1, engagement with prison learning has been in serious decline for much of the last decade. The 2018 Education and Employment Strategy temporarily reversed some of this fall, before engagement plummeted during the pandemic. During this time, social distancing restrictions meant classroom and workshop learning was effectively put on pause.¹⁰ Nonetheless, many prisons failed to return to normal teaching conditions until well after restrictions were lifted. Most recent reports show that learner numbers are still not at the pre-pandemic level.

Figure 1: Total prison learners, 2014/15 – 2022/23



Source: *Unlocking Potential 2016*, *OLASS 2014/15-2018/19*, *Prisoner Education 2020/21* and, *Prison Education and accredited programme statistics 2021/22 and 2022/23*

Meanwhile, the quality of prison education remains inadequate. In 2016, the Coates Review of education in prison raised serious concerns about the quality of education being provided. It found that the importance of education was not recognised in prisons and that the existing education system was inadequate. It also found that a fifth of prisoners would have preferred to be studying at a higher level than they currently were.¹¹ The review gave government 17 recommendations on how provision could be improved. Some of these recommendations included:

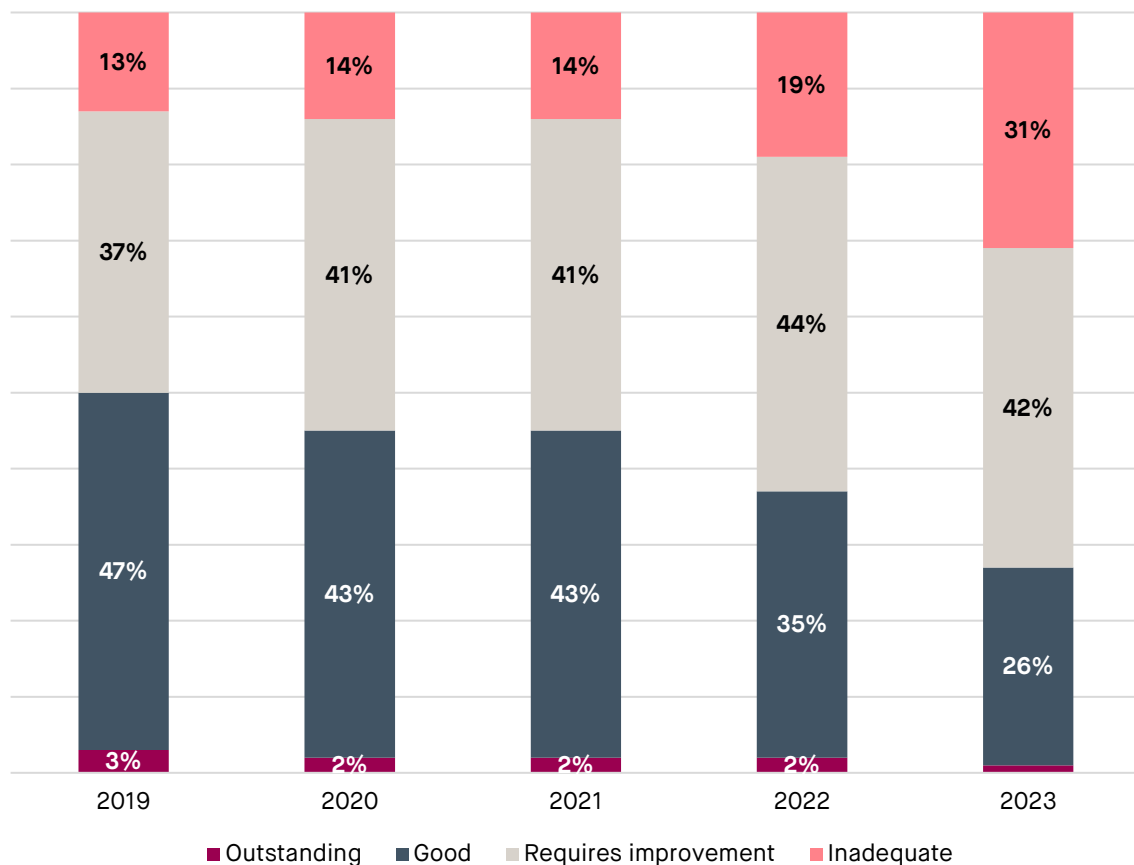
- A consistent and rigorous assessment mechanism in every prison.
- A Personal Learning Plan for every prisoner.
- A whole prison approach to identifying, working with and supporting prisoners with a learning difficulty or disability.

- Appropriate professional development support for prison staff and peer mentors to help them deliver high-quality education.
- Recruitment of high-quality teachers needs to be developed.
- Governors should be able to use education budgets to fund learning at level 3 and above.

Eight years on from the review, progress has been slow. A report from the Education Select Committee in 2022 found that many of the recommendations (including all those listed above) had either not been implemented or were implemented inconsistently across the estate.¹²

Criticism of the quality of education has also come from the Prisons Inspectorate and Ofsted. In its 2022/23 annual report, Ofsted commented “the overall effectiveness of education, skills and work provision in prisons is poor and continues to decline”.¹³ In the 2022/23 inspection year, 42 prisons and young offender institutions were inspected and only four were judged “good”; none were judged as “outstanding”.¹⁴ By the end of 2023, education, skills and work provision was rated as “requires improvement” or “inadequate” in 73% of prisons, up from 50% in 2019.¹⁵

Figure 2: Overall effectiveness of education, skills and work provision in prisons and young offender institutions



Source: *The Annual Report of His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2022/23*

The key issue is that education in prisons is not valued

The fundamental cause of this failure is the fact that education of prisoners is not valued. Institutions are not incentivised enough to take it seriously, and prisoners are not incentivised enough to care about it. This came through in our roundtables in two distinct ways. Firstly, participants noted that failure to pay education at the same rate as work means prisoners are effectively told that education is less valuable. Secondly, the wider cultural lack of priority and attention given to education means it is often rendered an afterthought. The impact of this means prisoners are less inclined to engage with the education on offer.

Unequal pay

All 'purposeful activity' in prisons must be paid, but while there is a standard rate, some activities can be paid at a higher rate.¹⁶ In some prisons "industry" (i.e. in prison work, such as cleaning) is better paid than education. Participants noted two core issues with unequal pay. Firstly, it means that prisoners who want to engage with education feel like they can't. While in custody, prisoners need to pay for things like phone credit, television rental, tea bags and toiletries.¹⁷ Many also look to save for a life after release, to better set them up for when they leave. It is no surprise, then, that many prisoners opt for the short-term economically favourable choice, over what might benefit them in the medium-term.

"when you say you get paid to be at work, you don't get paid to be at education, that is a real problem. Some prisons pay education the same as, as work, some don't...For those that don't... it's a real disadvantage for those with families, where people don't have any money of their own, and they get paid less to go into classrooms..."

Secondly, for those who have previously had negative experiences of education (which is common among prisoners), paying less for education conveys the message that it is less valuable. One participant noted that this can make people resentful of partaking in education, reinforcing disincentives.

"[if] they've got a negative experience of education already, and are forced to do it and paid less, that's not the introduction you want them to have to education...They're not huge sums of money either way, but I think it is really important idea that if you're being paid less, people often really resent that."

Prison governors have discretion over whether to pay work and learning at the standard or higher rate, and some have chosen to pay equally – but not all:

"I'm really surprised that you're still finding prisons where education is disincentivised through pay, because that's absolutely in the gift of the prison service and individual governors. And I thought we cracked it, you know, you have a standard hourly rate for work... this is still an issue I'm really, really surprised about. It feels like an easy win, to come from the centre to saying this is how we manage it."

Yet the government's position is to endorse the status quo. A government representative at our roundtable said they do not believe education should be paid equally to industry:

“Should it be an absolutely equal pay? You know, what, it's not in life is it? Truth is, an education is an investment in the future, you forego something now, in order to be able to achieve something more.... personally, I don't think we will, to be honest, or should, get to the point where we're treating, investment in human capital, exactly the same way... as the work output. But I do agree that we need to make sure the balance isn't way off.”

This logic, however, is difficult to apply to the prison context. Life in prison is not like life outside and decision making does not work in the same way.

“I think it's a very simplistic view of it. If you're looking at a couple of pounds a week and that's all you've got to get food and all sorts of things you don't have, you're not in a position to start to make those decisions in a meaningful way.”

If the position from government is that education is not worth as much as work, it is little wonder that this is the sentiment taken on by prison governors.

Education is often an afterthought for governors

As leader of the prison, the governor sets the culture, including towards education. If the governor does not see education as a priority, neither will the rest of the staff and, ultimately, neither will prisoners themselves.

“If we haven't got prisons that are willing and able to get people to jobs and education while they're in prison. It just doesn't work. We see it so often. So many places, the empty libraries, the empty workshops.”

Some governors have a very limited view on what “counts” as education, or who can be educators. Only education that takes place in a very traditional, lecture-in-a-classroom format may be recognised. But failure to look beyond classroom learning deprives prisoners of broader education opportunities, and sometimes developing vital skills. Peer-led education, for example, is frequently used to help prisoners learn how to read. Owing to stigma and embarrassment around not being able to read, prisoners may be reluctant to learn in an open classroom environment. They may be more comfortable learning on-wing, under the tutelage of a peer who has also learned to read as an adult. Distance learning programmes can be done in cell, and hidden learning can be embedded across prison activities. These other forms of learning can make education more accessible to a wider group, and can also help create a bridge to more formal, classroom learning as confidence grows.

“[some governors] have a strongly held belief that only teachers can teach reading, dismissing the role of mentors”

Secondly, participants expressed concern over the value and relevance of some education and training offerings. They suggested that too often education offerings do not consider what prisoners need. Beyond our roundtables, one of the most common criticisms of prison education in recent years is that it focuses only on basic and employability-oriented skills and qualifications.¹⁸ Such narrow learning can disincentivise prisoners who would be better served by provision that actually considered their needs interests and ambitions. There may not be any opportunities for prisoners to challenge and stretch themselves, stifling opportunities for personal growth. For those serving longer sentences, this lack of opportunity can be especially demoralising.

“[prison education] does need to include opportunities for people to progress and stretch themselves. In most prisons, for most mainstream provision, you go to level two, and then there are opportunities to do distance learning... and sometimes degrees... but they're quite limited”

While education is primarily delivered through four education providers, the curriculum they deliver has been shaped by what the governor of the prison has asked for. Beyond the main providers, governors can use the prison’s education budget to purchase more bespoke programmes from the Dynamic Purchasing System. They can form relationships with local employers to provide training programmes. Doing so, however, is at governors’ discretion. If the governor does not see the value in a broader curriculum or does want to extend beyond the basic functional curriculum, there is no real impetus for them to do so.

“the prisons have got the responsibility to develop the curriculum, as opposed to provider... We do engage with local employers... But if I'm honest, there's also a number of courses that are built around the prison. You'll find lot of prisons deliver cleaning, they're not delivered cleaning, because all the learners want to leave and be a cleaner”

Participants noted that recognising learning progression and celebrating achievement can act as a powerful motivator for education. This is especially the case for prisoners who may have previously struggled with education. This can be done informally, but can also be done with award and graduation ceremonies. However, not all governors are open to allowing these types of ceremonies in their prisons, not seeing the point.

“[we] take graduation ceremonies into prisons, where the prison will allow it”

“one of the really important things is about recognition and celebration of any form of achievement”

Undervalued by government

Governors are not alone in seeing education as lower priority. Government too has not valued education. Despite the lip service that is paid to value of education in prison, government action on education in prison does not add up. When it comes to personalisation of education, there is little encouragement from government for provision to be broad. The Prisons Strategy White Paper was criticised by prison charity Clinks, for not addressing the narrowness of education provision, instead continuing to emphasise literacy, numeracy and vocational skills.¹⁹

However, the most significant indicator of the government's values and priorities is funding for prison education. Participants noted that while prison culture around education certainly plays a role, resourcing is a significant factor and is falling far short of where it needs to be.

In 2022, the Education Select Committee noted that funding for prison education had not been increased in five years, staying at approximately £129 million per year. Given rising inflation and the increase in costs, funding effectively experienced an 8% decline between 2019/20 and 2022/23.²⁰ Meanwhile, the providers awarded the Prison Education Framework (PEF) contracts must work within their (ever-tightening), budgets and make the most out of what they receive. New PEF contracts are set to be launched in 2025, with some changes expected, but roundtable attendees were sceptical of new contracts having much effect.

"it looks, to me, like very much more of the same. It's the same focus, it's the same sort of contracts will be most of the same stuff. There's if anything slightly less money. So I'd be very surprised if come April 2025, what we see as a step change"

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- 1. Equalise pay between education and work.** As a commitment to acknowledging the importance of education for education's sake, and acknowledging that learning is as valuable as working, government should mandate that education and work are paid at the same rate in every prison, so that no prisoner misses out on educational opportunities for financial reasons.
- 2. Reverse the real term spending cut in financing of prisoner education.**
- 3. Incentivise prioritising education in prisons, with Ofsted judgements and rewarding prisons that do education well.** As it stands, there is no real incentive for governors and prisons to value and prioritise education. Learning and Skills provision and participation should form a more significant part of prison inspections and the overall grade awarded to prisons. Secondly, prisons who do education well, (e.g. having a suitable education and training strategy, a varied curriculum that fits with resettlement plans of prisoners) should be recognised and rewarded, such as with a visit from the prisons minister.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ ‘Reoffenders: Costs, Question for Ministry of Justice UIN127323, Tabled on 9 March 2022’, Written questions, answers and statements, 9 March 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-03-09/137323>.
- ² ‘Employing Prisoners and Ex-Offenders’ (Ministry of Justice, March 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unlock-opportunity-employer-information-pack-and-case-studies/employing-prisoners-and-ex-offenders>.
- ³ ‘Progress and Prejudice: Shifts in UK Employer Attitudes to Hiring People with Convictions’ (Workign Chance, 2022).
- ⁴ ‘IES Consultation: Commission on the Future of Employment Support’ (Unlock, 2022).
- ⁵ ‘IES Consultation: Commission on the Future of Employment Support’.
- ⁶ ‘Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2022 - 2023’ (Ministry of Justice, 28 September 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2022-to-2023/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2022-2023>.
- ⁷ Dame Sally Coates, ‘Unlocking Potential A Review of Education in Prison’ (Ministry of Justice, 2016), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f537eed915d74e33f5bf5/education-review-report.pdf>.
- ⁸ ‘Education and Employment Strategy’ (Ministry of Justice, May 2018).
- ⁹ ‘Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: Why Prisoners Need an Education to Climb the Ladder of Opportunity: First Report of Session 2022–23’ (House of Commons Education Committee, 11 May 2022), <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22218/documents/164715/default/>.
- ¹⁰ ‘Coronavirus (Covid-19): The impact on prisons: Fourth Report of the session 2019–21’ (House of Commons Justice Committee, 27 July 2020)
- ¹¹ Coates, ‘Unlocking Potential A Review of Education in Prison’.
- ¹² ‘Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: Why Prisoners Need an Education to Climb the Ladder of Opportunity: First Report of Session 2022–23’.
- ¹³ ‘Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2022/23’ (Ofsted, November 2023).pg 111
- ¹⁴ ‘Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2022/23’.
- ¹⁵ ‘Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2022/23’.
- ¹⁶ ‘Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: Why Prisoners Need an Education to Climb the Ladder of Opportunity: First Report of Session 2022–23’.
- ¹⁷ ‘Money in Prison’, Prison Reform Trust (blog), accessed 21 February 2024, <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/adviceguide/money-in-prison/>; ‘Life in Prison: Earning and Spending Money’ (HM Inspectorate Prisons, 2016).
- ¹⁸ ‘Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: Why Prisoners Need an Education to Climb the Ladder of Opportunity: First Report of Session 2022–23’.
- ¹⁹ ‘Clinks Response to the Prison Strategy White Paper’ (Clinks, February 2022).
- ²⁰ Jon Collins, ‘Getting the New Prison Education Contracts Right’, Prisoners’ Education Trust, 5 June 2023, <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2023/06/getting-the-new-prison-education-contracts-right/>; ‘Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: Why Prisoners Need an Education to Climb the Ladder of Opportunity: First Report of Session 2022–23’.