

The crisis in prison education

Brian Hamilton, UCU Prison Education Branch chairperson, talks to PSE.

Most post-16 educators probably have no idea about prison education. What is it? Why is it important?

Prison education is probably some people's first and last chance to engage with education and a way back for people on the outskirts of a society they feel excluded from. Education opens opportunities within their own family and social life that weren't available before they entered prison, for instance being able to read to their children and engage with their education; for some, to function at a basic level they weren't able to before - just reading road signs, shopping lists or supermarket prices. Past that level, we try to get people trained in vocational subjects - hopefully a way to employment, although prison education isn't funded enough to get people qualified to the level they need. It doesn't fund qualifications past Level 2. Only exceptionally do people participate in Open University courses. But at an economic level, it costs a fortune to have somebody in prison. A small investment in prison education is a massive saving for the taxpayer and the criminal justice system. And if we're looking at it as a whole society, society should be judged on whether it looks after the weakest and people at the extremes - the young, the old, the sick and people who've entered the world of crime. From a societal perspective, that's why prison education is important.

How has prison education changed in the years you've worked in it?

I've worked in prison education for 30 years. It's getting worse. The prison service buy a product, not education, without really having any experience of education. It's like they're buying toilet roll. Education contracts are very binary. If you've been involved in education a long time, you'll know its benefits. Attitudes and minds can change; offenders can leave with a different perspective about re-entering society. That's measurable. They're contributing to society if they don't re-offend. But prison education is run in a very value-for-money approach. The curriculum has narrowed over the years, leaving little opportunity for education as a

whole experience. It's pretty much Level 1 and 2 English and maths and City and Guilds Level 2 in a vocational subject, with a few exceptions not in the main funding model.

There are two funding models. The main education contract provided by the four main providers - Novus, Milton Keynes College, People Plus and Weston College - for English, maths, IT is where most money gets spent. Then there's the 'dynamic purchasing system' individual governors can spend on education as they see fit. That system has two problems. The main contract is very tightly managed by the prison service. Most people involved in that contract spend their time providing contract compliance material to the managers, not benefiting students. In the new Prison Education Service contract coming in with providers, the prison service can take up to ten per cent of the funding back if they think providers haven't met their targets. If the providers are driven by targets, staff are driven by targets. It's all about meeting targets, not improving education. I'll give you an example. Within the new prison education contract, the prison service have introduced two new jobs, an Education Manager and a Learning Difficulties and Disabilities specialist to monitor the contract. Both are prison service employees. There's also a Learning and Skills Manager within each prison, also to monitor the contract. You could employ a lot of teachers with that money. These people don't deliver education but make other people jump through hoops to fulfil contracts.

Managing costs and activity, not education - that seems similar to FE.

Absolutely, but more so in prison education because every four or five years providers have to re-bid for the contracts. To compete they have reduced the terms and conditions of their employees over the years to the point it's unsustainable. They can't recruit or retain. People Plus, one of the main providers, have a commercial advantage over the colleges because they don't pay into the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS). Private companies are outside that scheme. Their costs are 16 per cent less than the colleges' because they only pay eight

per cent pension contribution whereas the employers' contribution is 24 per cent for TPS. We want the same pension deal in place so people working in colleges who are TUPE'd across after the next bidding round would keep their teachers' pension which you lose if you're TUPE'd to People Plus now. It's also a major concern that with re-tendering you end up with new employers every four or five years, as some prison educators have been.

Contracts have annual delivery plans (ADPs) agreed between the prison governor and the provider. The governor can say *'I don't want that course next year'*. That teacher is then redundant. Even with contracts, prison educators are only guaranteed work for a year at a time. That's down to the whim of an individual governor. You can lose your job at the end of the year but also your pension when things are restructured. You don't know who you'll be working for, you'll be at the bottom of any pay scale, and, as the curriculum narrows each year, you'll only be teaching Level 1 and 2 with little scope for anything else. That means prison educators quickly become deskilled, whilst technology in prisons is five or ten years behind, although HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service) and the providers may claim to spend money on it.

Why would anyone come into prison education? There's very much an older workforce who've been there years. Young people leave very quickly because there are no career prospects or job security. When I started, prison educators had more autonomy, the curriculum was wider. Basically it was: *'Here's a budget. What can you provide?'* Now it's very prescribed.

How is all this justified educationally?

It isn't. They think we're preparing people for work so we need to get them a Level 2 English and maths and a vocational qualification. The rest falls behind. There is some ESOL, but not enough to meet the demand. There's no wider education going on apart from the odd thing, but it's all down to governors who have the budget.

In the late 90s, early 2000s, there were a lot of non-vocational and some academic opportunities. There might be a talking-French class or things like pottery or drama, history, music. That engaged people in education. Once engaged it was: *'I might go to a maths class now, or an English class to help my reading and writing.'* *'Well, you've done alright here, why don't you give it a go?'* Now, the prison service just forces people to come through using privileges and incentives. There's a box to tick that prisoners engage in purposeful activity. If you don't come to education, you lose some privileges. There's a lot of angst. A volunteer is always better

than a pressed man. Some have been out of education all of their lives. They're only there because they could lose their canteen money, association or other privileges. The sought-after jobs in prison - say working in the servery - are paid higher than attending education. Every pound is important. It could be the difference between making a phone call home and not.

So how do prison educators keep going?

It's dispiriting. For people who've been in prison education a long time, it's working with people and making a difference that keeps them going. But because of how the contracts are now run that's becoming less and less. Tutors spend more time completing paperwork to satisfy the contract than engaging with individuals as human beings in the way you'd like to - giving them encouragement and time to evolve. Now it's all: *'Have the targets been set?'* If somebody's on Entry 1 maths, the prison contract managers think: four weeks for Entry 1, four each for Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1, Level 2. So in twenty weeks they expect to have somebody in a proper maths class at Level 2, which is impossible. Before, they'd have been brought through more gently and allowed to develop. Now it's all about contracts and targets. An example sums it up. You've got to map your work in three different colours. I'm trying to engage with a 45 year old in for murder who hasn't engaged in education all his life, and I treat him like a two year old. Because they say: *'Oh, you've got to have your SPAG in there'*, as they say, *'for Ofsted'*. It's not engaging with that person at a level that's going to improve them. Can you imagine what the response is on marking his work in three different colours?

Thinking of the correlations between prison, childhood poverty, domestic violence, say, and their effect on education - prison education seems to be heading in the wrong direction.

Yes, but people have to justify their jobs. That's the point. They don't trust us to do a professional job or see the importance of wider education or developing offenders as citizens. They only see a binary: *'If you don't meet that target we're taking 2 per cent off your funding; don't meet this, we take another 2 per cent'*.

Are there examples of more student-centred, humanistic approaches that, from what you're saying, would be more appropriate in prison?

I can give an example. *Storybook Dads* encourages people to record stories to send home to their kids.

But that's not through education. There isn't time for any of that now. It's all about processing not educating people, which means they're more likely to revert back to what they were doing before.

What about higher education in prison? There are some celebrated cases.

They are few and far between. People can study through the Open University and should be able to take out student loans. The prison service likes these things so they can say they're educating people. You'll read about prisoners in higher education. It's the vanity stuff. But most people are on lower levels to Level 2, not beyond.

How does UCU support prison educators?

We spend most of our time trying to improve terms and conditions. If you're a trainer, contact hours are 1200, up from 820; an academic prison educator is on 999 hours.

There's not a lot of time for teachers to think about or discuss pedagogy. It's a beleaguered sector, driven down so far it can't manage. At the moment, people aren't going to commit to a career in prison education.

Hopefully that will change. We've been campaigning on two things: moving prison education from the Ministry of Justice back into the Department of Education so we're judged like any other person within the education system, and a national contract for prison educators.

We're in pay negotiations now. What will make a big difference is if the Fair New Deal agreed with the civil service unions comes in. This basically means a civil servant transferred out of the civil service will retain their pension rights. The Ministry of Justice and Treasury are giving it sloppy shoulders because

they don't want us to retain these rights. They are making no commitments or engaging this side of the election, by which time tenders will have gone in.

They want new private companies in the sector so our pension money becomes shareholders' profit. It's simple. They don't want the Fair New Deal because people bidding for work would need to bid at that level of costings. We want to get our terms and conditions as best as we can so anybody bidding for the work will have to take it over with those terms and conditions. It makes it less attractive because there's no profit in it.

How did the dispute with Novis during Covid in 2020 affect prison education and educators?

The dispute showed we could get over the line. Only our union branch took industrial action over health and safety through the pandemic. No FE college or university or other workplace did it. We got over the line again in last year's pay ballot. They know we can win ballots else they'd just tell us to get lost. It's about changing power in industrial relations.

We can definitely start pushing for change. Prison contracts are made in such a way that the providers can't afford to fail. They're dependent on us to make the contracts work. HMPPS manage contracts but haven't the experience to run anything educational.

It needs to change if there's going to be a future for prison education. That's what we're fighting for. It takes a certain person to be a prison educator, but what's the point of having moral ideals when it's impossible to work in a prison as it stands?

