

Pathway to a Prison Education Strategy (JUPG, February 2023)

UCU's strategic ambition is for a stable and effectively resourced prison education system which supports prison educators to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum to students in prison. Ultimately, this vision will ensure the best outcomes for students, society and the economy.

Prison educators have suffered from continued de-professionalisation over recent years. Low salaries, high risk of assault, poor continuing professional development and unsustainable rates of attrition are all too common features for staff working in prison education. The result is a loss of expertise, increased over-working and rising levels of attacks on staff and violence in prisons.

Our 'Hidden Voices' report (https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11726/Hidden-voices/pdf/Hidden_voices_Aug2021.pdf) jointly published with the Prisoner Learning Alliance found that over seven in ten (70.8%) respondents indicated that they intend to leave prison education in the next five years, with many respondents drawing attention to a lack of progression and stagnating pay as key issues.

The purpose and value of prison education should be about developing the person as a whole – not just in terms of the qualifications they hold for employment. Education and the process of engaging in learning have a value in and of themselves, which is a mark of a civilized society. A focus on simply reducing recidivism without also considering a prisoner's right to education and self-development more broadly is simply not sufficient if a sentence is going to be purposefully spent.

The recent Ofsted report (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202122-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202122>) is both insightful and concerning regarding the quality of provision and service within prison education. Many of its key findings align with UCU's views on the issues that need to be addressed, but in our opinion these cannot be done via tinkering with the current commissioning model.

Prison Education Framework (PEF)

One of the most challenging features of prison education is linked to the funding model, which originates through government commissioning arrangements. This commissioning model has diverted resources away from the development, design and delivery of truly meaningful education. The process of commissioning education for profit in prisons has created a fragmented and often ignored workforce who face many challenges, including the erosion of terms and conditions, career progression and professional autonomy.

The government puts prison education contracts out to competitive tender every four to five years under the Prison Education Framework. The four incumbent education providers are Milton Keynes College, Novus, People Plus and Weston College. The contracts have a total annual value of approximately £129 million and the contractual option to extend for another two years has been triggered to March 2025.

The current PEF commissioning process we believe is failing learners and failing staff and has become more about managing and meeting the contract as opposed to its purported aims of delivering meaningful education with a view to reducing reoffending. It actively militates against equal access to education for learners in prison. We need to see the development of a fit-for-purpose innovative prison education curriculum that sees the education provision being designed around social, cultural and educational needs that help to reduce reoffending as opposed to contractual restrictions aimed at delivering a profit.

Professional recognition

The recruitment of high-quality teachers needs to be developed, with the focus on both the training and recruitment of new teachers and on the recruitment of high-quality teachers from other sectors.

The Education Select Committee recently highlighted the staffing crisis among prison educators in its “Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity” report. The report noted that “tackling the crisis in staff recruitment and retention must be at the heart of any strategy to provide an effective prison education system” and that “poor pay, lack of career development, unsafe working environments and no time or respect to do a quality job has left the recruitment and retention of qualified and experienced prison educators at crisis point. There are hundreds of prison education vacancies, with more money being offered to agency workers rather than long-standing and serving teachers.”

We would like to see a National Contract for prison educators which:

- a. has a single transparent pay structure, aligned to FE Colleges, with incremental progression for service not performance, applicable whoever the employer is;
- b. treats vocational and classroom-based professionals the same;
- c. ensures that all staff receive a proper induction programme that prepares them for the rules of the prison environment (jail craft);
- d. clarifies the role of the teacher/tutor/lecturer by providing a proper job description that makes it clear what responsibilities they should and shouldn't undertake and defines what is and isn't contact time;
- e. has a maximum number of teaching hours each week and across the year, with specific time to plan and reflect on lessons, undertake admin duties each week, develop courses and deal with security issues. Contact time should be clearly defined;
- f. includes time set aside for CPD and achieving teaching qualifications, with proper remission from teaching duties, and face-to-face training for prison educators;
- g. guarantees access to the Teachers Pension Scheme and Local Government Pension Scheme for Learning Support staff;
- h. has a set number of holidays to reflect the norm for those in the teaching profession;
- i. contains sick pay entitlements that reflect the norm of those in the teaching profession;
- j. provides for decent maternity and paternity leave and allows pregnant staff to be removed from contact with prisoners as soon as they advise their employer of their pregnancy;
- k. ensures that exclusions from a prison/the prison estate can be challenged at employment tribunal so staff have access to natural justice giving parity with all other workers;

Also, to ensure that this contract can be adhered to, prison governors/authorities must guarantee that:

- there is proper respect for prison education staff as education professionals by ensuring that the relationship of trust between teachers and learners is respected, and that teachers/tutors/lecturers aren't asked to take on the duties of officers;
- the regimes in prisons allow for meaningful education at appropriate times. Teaching should be in blocks of 3–3.5 hours (with shorter sessions for maths and English) and the teaching day and week should be the same across establishments.

Pay

Salary is one of the key inhibitors of improvement in the prison education sector. Our comparison of average pay of members employed by the four Prison Education Framework providers in England with educators in the FE and other education sectors identified significant disparities, despite prison educators being similarly qualified to teachers in the college sector.

Average annual salaries for prison educators (£29,493) lag significantly behind the salaries of English further education teachers (£31,308), teachers in Welsh prisons (£36,504) and secondary school teachers in England (£39,900). This disparity fails to sufficiently reward prison educators for their comparable work and will invariably negatively impact both the recruitment and retention of prison educators.

At present, prison educators are painfully aware of their precarious job security – they are constantly at risk in a perpetual cycle of redundancies linked to the use of Annual Delivery Plans or contracts being TUPE'd from one provider to another. There is also the very real risk of losing their TPS pension rights if their employer switches to a private provider via the commissioning process.

The salary differentials between teaching in prison and teaching in a further education college serve to limit diversity and inclusion in the prison workforce. Equalising salaries will increase the race, gender and socioeconomic disparities in who is able to teach in a prison.

Prisons are not safe

The Joint Unions in Prisons Alliance (JUPA) 2019 report (https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10304/Safe-inside-JUPA-report-on-health-and-safety-in-prisons/pdf/JUPA_safe-inside_health-and-safety-in-prisons_report_Jun19.pdf) highlighted a prison system that is failing to meet the basic health and safety needs of the workforce. If staff do not feel safe in prisons, then in turn neither will people who are in prison. As such, the rehabilitation process breaks down and prisons are unable to perform their policy intent.

JUPA's report was based on a survey of 1,643 respondents who work in prisons and found that violence against staff was shockingly prevalent. Over a quarter (26%) of respondents had been a victim of physical violence in the past year. The report found that staff are also routinely subjected to the effects of psychoactive substances (52.7%).

It is appalling that two-thirds of staff in prisons report feeling unsafe in their workplace, and that so many (57%) say their concerns aren't being dealt with properly. We urgently need much tougher action from the government and prison employers to improve the safety and working conditions of staff in our prisons.

Employability

The overriding focus on employability is a consistent theme throughout the direction of recent UK government policy and misses the broader value of prison education, which needs to be acknowledged and resourced accordingly. Our view is you can't put a price on the ability and self-worth of someone being released from prison and being able to go home and read a bed-time story to their children. This echoes entirely with the 2016 Coates review findings that *"employability' should not drive the entire focus of the curriculum"* (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf).

Summary

UCU are calling for:

- a full review of the Prison Education Framework's current operation and the prison education curriculum;
- a prison education service that is overseen by the DfE as a national prison education service on a not-for-profit basis;
- a comprehensive review of the recommendations from the Coates review in order to inform these current proposals;
- the implementation of the Joint Unions in Prison Alliance recommendations for safer prisons;
- a national contract for prison education staff and professional respect and parity of esteem with FE.

Requested action

All supportive MPs are encouraged to table the following for the next Justice Questions (deadline Thursday 9 February, questions on Tuesday 21 February, full notes and suggested supplementaries to be distributed to MPs successful in the shuffle): **Whether the Prison Education Service will set unified pay scales for staff.**

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