

# **Parliament’s Justice Committee Inquiry into *‘Rehabilitation and resettlement: ending the cycle of reoffending’***

## **Introduction**

The University and College Union (UCU) represents over 120,000 post-16 education educators, some of whom are educators in prisons across the four nations in the UK.

In its 2022 report on prison education, the Education Select Committee warned: “The quality of prison education is of huge concern” – while “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”.

One of the most challenging features of prison education is linked to the funding model that 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, often-ignored workforce who face many challenges, including the erosion of terms and conditions, a lack of career progression and diminishing professional autonomy.

UCU’s strategic ambition is for a stable and effectively resourced prison education system that 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.

## **Methodology of evidence collection and further information**

Our evidence to the Inquiry is based on written feedback from prison education members. To provide the most relevant information to the Inquiry, we tailored some of the Inquiry questions for our prison education members. In the interest of brevity, we provide a selection only of the feedback we received; we would, however, strongly welcome the opportunity for UCU or our practising prison education members to provide oral evidence and share their expertise with the Committee. Names of the individuals who gave evidence, the names of their employers and the prisons in which they work have been anonymised for confidentiality.

## **Section 2: Rehabilitation in prisons**

- 1. What is the current offer of training and education available in your prison(s) and is it sufficient? If not, why not?**

**Prison educator:** “The provision of education in prisons is determined by individual prison governors, therefore the training and education offer varies between prisons. At [X prison] [Y prison education provider] is commissioned to provide core education, including Functional Skills in maths and English, along with a basic IT course. Other offerings include ESOL for foreign nationals, Art, Catering and Food Safety, Peer Mentoring, Radio Production, and Health and Safety. Additional courses provided through other providers, as part of the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS), include Dry Lining, Railtrack, Web Development (coding and design), and a couple of rehabilitation/through-the-gate courses, including a business course. However, many of these courses are consistently oversubscribed, with long waiting lists. Applications and allocations are managed by the prison, based on an initial assessment score. Often, prisoners are assigned to classes they do not want or may not be appropriate for their prior educational level. The decisions are made by prison administrators, not teachers. Waiting lists are long, and prisoners commonly complain about the limited availability of courses above Level 2 (GCSE equivalent). The only higher-level options are Distance Learning courses funded by the Prisoners' Education Trust (depending on their

available funds) or self-funded Open University degrees (available only to those within six-years of release and funded through a student loan). At the other end of the spectrum, many courses do not lead to qualifications, and when they do, the qualifications are often too basic to improve employability”.

**Prison educator:** “The education offer focuses too narrowly on basic literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills and fails to address diverse educational and personal development needs. A broader offer could and should foster creativity, critical thinking, and personal growth, which are key for rehabilitation and reintegration. The prison education’s focus on measurable outcomes, such as passing exams or earning certificates, creates a transactional model of education. This approach overlooks the deeper rehabilitative potential of education, such as building self-esteem, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills. These softer outcomes, while harder to quantify, are crucial for reducing recidivism and fostering personal growth. Learning for personal growth, such as opportunities to explore art, philosophy, or self-expression, is often undervalued or excluded from the offer. The lack of space for such opportunities means that education in prisons is often perceived as functional rather than meaningful.

Education programmes in prisons are frequently under-resourced, with insufficient teaching materials, outdated technology and limited access to books, tools, or other learning aids. This scarcity limits the scope and quality of activities that educators can deliver. For instance, vocational training programmes may lack the equipment needed to provide hands-on, practical experience of modern workplace practices, rendering them less relevant to learners’ future employment prospects”.

**Prison educator:** “I teach horticulture in prisons, but since the garden has been Tarmaced over I now have to teach horticulture with plant pots in class”.

**Prison educator:** “The prison decides what is to be delivered and most of the courses chosen to be delivered are paper-based or IT-based. Prison learners need more hands-on activities, as most did not stay on or do well in school because it did not cater for their needs. ‘Lecturing at’ learners is not the most effective learning/teaching technique, as is well-recognised in pedagogy; but lack of resources in the prisons inhibits better education and rehabilitation”.

## **2. Does the training and education differ for those in the youth custody estate and if so, in what way?**

**Prison educator:** “Yes, the education provision is much wider in the youth custody estate, aligning more closely with the National Curriculum; however, the delivery is negatively affected by the system’s processes”.

**Prison educator:** “Within the Youth Custody Service (YCS), there are mandated minimum learning hours although these are inconsistently met, meaning that children are unable to access a curriculum that is genuinely comparable to schools. Children are not allocated to classes by needs or sentence plan, but rather, with a focus on risk. This can also be seen within the adult estate. The rehabilitative needs of learners are secondary to security and safety and prisons are challenged to manage risk and meet individual needs in tandem, due to lack of resources.

The Youth Custody Service (YCS) and the Young Offender Institutions (YOI) have seen a change in the nature of the children and young people incarcerated over the years. We are seeing more children / young people with complex needs involved with serious organised crime and consequently, the sentences they serve tend to be much longer. The curriculum has not been revised to recognise this shift, by adopting a more trauma-informed approach to teaching and

learning. Meanwhile, teachers in both the youth and adult estate are being physically and sexually assaulted and are subject to constant verbal abuse as prisons focus on the risk between learners rather than teachers”.

**3. What role does trauma-informed practice have on the delivery of purposeful activities in prisons?**

**Prison educator:** “Trauma Informed training has recently been offered to Prison Educators on an ad-hoc basis. This is a step in the right direction, but at the same time, adopting a trauma-informed approach in teaching within prisons is not without its challenges due to the problems with the prison system. Students affected by trauma benefit from predictability and routine, which help create a sense of safety - a cornerstone of trauma-informed practice. However, prisons are often operating under unpredictable and inconsistent routines. Lockdowns, staff shortages, or security concerns can disrupt schedules without notice, meaning that classes may be frequently cancelled or postponed, which leaves educators unable to provide the stability and trust and reliability required for a trauma-informed approach to teaching/learning and rehabilitation.

This is a problem that relates to the Prison Education Framework (PEF) contract. PEF prioritises delivering education with measurable outcomes such as achieving qualifications and specific employability benchmarks. However, these performance-driven metrics leave little room for the relational and flexible teaching practices that are central to trauma-informed approaches, such as adapting to the emotional and psychological needs of learners. The new Prison Education Service (PES) contracts should facilitate a trauma-informed approach”.

**4. To what extent are prisoners given enough time out of their cell to engage in training and education?**

**Prison educator:** “Prisoners are not given enough time out of their cells to engage in training and education. There is a shortage of prison officers to escort prisoners from their cells to the classroom, resulting in disrupted education. Entire wings may be locked down, resulting in classes with only a few learners. Furthermore, scheduled delivery times are not always adhered to, further reducing the time learners spend in class”.

**Prison educator:** “This is a problem tied in with the Prison Education Framework (PEF) contract, discussed in another question.

**5. Does contracting and staffing have any impact on the delivery of training and education?**

**Prison educator:** “Yes, the current approach undermines the teaching profession. Priority is given to the legal contractual process over the subject matter of the contract, being purposeful education and rehabilitation for prison students. This means that a concentration of resources – including financial resources – is spent on administering and overseeing the contracts, leaving less funding available for the actual provision of education to prisoners. Some courses are commissioned to support the operational needs of the prison, such as Food Safety and Health and Safety courses, which are required for certain prison jobs. This diverts the education budget to operational prison needs, such as cleaning and kitchen work, rather than good quality education for rehabilitative purposes. The clawback clauses in the contracts and their punitive nature is another issue than adds unnecessary complications to the delivery of more meaningful prison education for prisoners”.

**Prison educator:** “The outsourcing of prison education prioritises contract management over actual education and rehabilitation. Contracts for the provision of prison education fail to allocate sufficient funding for maintaining facilities, recruiting and training adequate staff, or

providing relevant education resources. There is little scope to embed soft skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, or emotional resilience. Deeper learning, personal growth, and enrichment activities such as reading for pleasure are neglected, reducing the transformative potential of education. This creates systemic barriers to delivering education in prisons and undervalues the contribution that education can make to rehabilitation.

Additionally, as prison education is provided by private providers in England, where they have to tender for MOJ contracts every few years to deliver prison education, it means the teachers are stuck in a merry-go-round under threat of being 'TUPE'd' – being transferred between private providers when providers win/lose contracts. This has an impact on learners in that it breaks the chain of educational continuity (which is central to a trauma-informed system). Due to this process, teachers are in a constant state of lack of job security. Further, without a national contract for prison educators, private education providers offer terms and conditions that are inferior to FE colleges (and they in turn offer inferior terms and conditions to schools).

Another related negative factor of the PEF contract is that the Annual Delivery Plan (ADP) element of the contract guarantees prison educators work for only one year at a time. This means that prison educators face perpetual anxiety as to whether their courses and consequently their employment are to be recommissioned, thereby compounding the instability of their employment, low morale and low retention. The lack of stability and continuity results in a negative impact on learners”.

**6. To what extent do prison building and their maintenance facilitate or hinder the training and education offer?**

**Prison educator:** “Prison infrastructure often hinders education. Teachers are frequently scheduled to deliver classes in unsuitable areas, and there is intense competition for available offices and classrooms. More generally, poor on-wing facilities—such as the lack of showers, heating, and uncomfortable mattresses—leave prisoners poorly equipped to learn. Operational challenges, including prisoner movement between wings and the separation of certain individuals, lead to lengthy transfers, reducing the time spent in classrooms”.

**Prison educator:** “Classes are filled with broken furniture, poor ventilation, poor flooring, mould in prisoners’ cells, inconsistent heating in cells, all of which has a demoralising impact on prisoners. When prisoners live and study in neglected environments, it makes them feel neglected and as if they do not matter either”.

**7. Do you have any examples of best practice within the prison service in promoting training and education?**

**Prison educator:** “On a local level, there have been successful initiatives. For example, a business course recently generated 71 enquiries in just 48-hours through a coordinated campaign using fliers, posters, and electronic messaging directly targeting prisoners. This is just one example, but it demonstrates the unmet demand for relevant educational opportunities”.

**8. Other relevant information**

**Prison educator:** “Staff shortage is one of the biggest problems in prisons that lead to other problems. Some education departments have become hot-spots for drug-dealing and drug-taking due to a lack of prison guards to search prisoners. The drug-dealing and drug-taking brings with it bullying and violence. The lack of staff to enforce a ‘No smoking/vaping’ policy recently resulted in one student stabbing a teacher in the face with a vape pen. Some teachers

have reported being under the influence of noxious substances from passive inhalation, resulting in hospital admissions and ongoing health problems. The HMPPS do not take it seriously enough. Another problem we have seen in the education department as a result of a lack of prison guards is where students' frustration at not being able to access the toilet led them to urinating in bins and a female teacher being exposed to a male student urinating in her cup. Aside from the obvious sexual connotations, this also places staff at increased risk of violence as they try to manage this intolerable situation".

**Prison educator:** "Prisoners are only allowed one toilet break in a 3-hour session. Before they enter the classroom, prisoners are held in a 'holding room' and they can be there for up to an hour before entering the classroom. Many want to go to the toilet before they enter class – sometimes it is allowed, sometimes not. Once in class, when prisoners want to go to the toilet, it can take 20-minutes for the officers to come to the class to escort them, and some of the time the officers are not around or are too busy with other things to take prison learners. This is not a good system for learning".

We reiterate that we would welcome the opportunity for UCU or our practising prison education members to provide oral evidence and further share their expertise with the Inquiry.

### **University and College Union (UCU)**

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