



**Prison Educators:  
Professionalism Against  
the Odds**

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# Executive Summary

## The research

This report summarises the findings of research conducted by the University and College Union (UCU) and the Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System (CECJS) at the Institute of Education, University of London to learn more about prison educators and to explore the impact of offender learner funding on their professionalism and practice. To date, whilst there have been a number of significant reforms to the prison education regime, there has been a lack of research into the professionalism and practice of prison educators and their professional insights. This study seeks to address this. The findings are based on a questionnaire completed by 278 prison educators working in England.

## Findings

### ***Prison education as a professional career***

The career and role of prison educators suffers from having a lower professional status than that of teaching staff in Further Education (FE) Colleges or in Adult Education. Their professional status is restricted by the:

- conditions dictated by the funding available;
- structures through which this funding is allocated;
- frequent shift of management responsibility that militates against stability and experience; and
- constraints of working within tight security arrangements.

### ***Policy and funding***

Much of the criticism voiced concerning the professional aspects of being a prison educator focused on the *consequences of prison education policy and funding*. Respondents were heavily critical of two main aspects of prison education policy: the practice of competitive tendering for prison education that takes place every three to five years; and that funding had been dependent on educational outcomes achieved.

- Sixty two per cent of the open responses to prison education policy criticised the *negative effect these two factors are having on the prisoners as learners and on the overall quality of education* offered. In their view, profit was the overriding concern of the prison contract providers.
- Almost 20% referred to the negative impact of re-tendering on staffing and the perceived negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning.
- Fifteen per cent raised issues of poor management in relation to how education was managed both on a local scale and at provider level.
- Other factors included lack of appropriate qualifications for learners; the lack of consultation on the views of prison staff; and government prioritising political priorities over demonstrated need.

### ***Prison educators as a professional group***

Prison educators are a *highly qualified group of practitioners* with 97.1% possessing a qualification at Level 4 or above and/or a teaching qualification.

The profile of prison educators in terms of gender was similar to the profile of teaching staff in FE colleges with approximately two thirds being female. The majority of staff in both prison and FE were white British and there was a slightly higher percentage of staff from BME backgrounds in FE than in

prison education. On average there was a lower proportion of younger people teaching in prisons than in FE, and a comparatively greater proportion of older people teaching in prisons than in FE.

The research showed that prison educators constitute a *motivated workforce* that had *chosen to work in prison education* rather than in mainstream FE or Adult Education: 75% of those who responded had previously worked in other educational settings and were attracted to working in prison to make full use of their experience. For over a third of respondents the initial motivation for teaching in a prison was to make a difference and improve the life chances of prisoners, whom they perceived as having been failed by the system.

## **Professionalism**

Although 38% of respondents highlighted the transforming aspect of prison education – giving prisoners an educational opportunity and a second chance in life – and, for 34%, that the purpose of prison education was rehabilitation or reducing re-offending, many of these respondents regretted the fact that the context and circumstances of being a prison educator had changed over time in what they felt was a negative direction. Examples cited included learners unable to access education appropriate to their needs, inappropriate scheduling for learner needs and lack of availability of one-to-one support where necessary.

The notion that prison education could be a fulfilling career was dismissed by a third of those surveyed and half said that they were likely to look for a new job in the next 12 months. Positive comments were in the minority although a few participants felt that management were positive and the working conditions were fine.

The findings point towards a workforce whose terms of employment have become increasingly casualised, who are given very little recognition of their experience and little opportunity to use their judgement independently, and whose views are not consulted by those who manage them. The following factors contributed to this situation.

- *Contractual arrangements* did not offer security of employment with just half the respondents being on full time contracts; the other half were either employed part time with a contract, or hourly paid.
- *The workload* of prison educators exceeded the hours they were paid to work. Over 85% of respondents worked between five to over eleven unpaid hours per week.
- *Comparison in terms of salary and role with FE* staff showed that a greater proportion of prison educators were paid at the lower end of the salary scale than was the case for FE staff. Part-time staff were likely to be employed on lower salary points than full-time staff.
- Although recognised to be important in the prison environment, *security measures in the prison context* had a negative impact on learning and teaching. Major concerns included restricted access to ICT, the loss of teaching time due to the movement of students within the prison environment and restrictions on the use of specific teaching resources.

- Further factors that hindered a fully professional approach to prison education included:
  - insufficient teaching resources for educators to carry out their job effectively;
  - insufficient access to adequate past education records of their learners;
  - insufficient staff to deliver a continuous quality education;
  - a lack of appropriate assistance for learners with physical or learning disabilities; and
  - bullying by managers.

Together, these issues reduced the capacity of professionals to teach and learners to learn.

- Most respondents considered that their role was different from that of colleagues working in a college or university and that prison education presented greater challenges for which they would appreciate recognition as a specialist group. The challenges which had the most impact included high workload, behaviour management, and high turnover of prisoners.

### ***Professional training and continued professional development***

Prison educators in this survey were highly qualified. Nonetheless, respondents often stated that their Initial Teacher Education had not covered their particular needs as prison educators and that funding, time off and payment for *Continuing Professional Development* to develop both subject expertise and teaching methodologies were *either in decline, or in many cases, non-existent*.

Where training for prison educators did exist, the quality of the provision was criticised by 50.7% of the respondents, even though 64% reported that the training received over the last 18 months had been relevant to their role, but not to the subjects taught. Approximately 30% of respondents found training that related directly to security and associated issues about working in a prison useful.

### **Conclusion**

This research has shed greater light on who prison educators are, their backgrounds and inspirations for working in the field. In highlighting the professional aspirations and challenges of the role, alongside prison educators' experiences of prison education policy, this survey has shown important tensions between the aims of prison education and what happens in practice.

The survey enabled prison educators to give voice to a number of serious concerns around: health and safety; recruitment to the profession; professional autonomy; salary, terms and conditions; and training and professional development opportunities. In many case respondents highlighted how the negative features of their work environment had an impact on the quality of education and the effectiveness of the teaching and learning provision they were able support.

There were strong messages that, if prison education policy is designed to support learners in their personal development, rehabilitation, and successful re-entry into society then the capacities of the professionals who enable this would be improved if their work was adequately supported with more appropriate recognition, training and conditions.

# Recommendations

The following eight recommendations are offered to support improvement in the prison education sector.

## Supporting teaching and learning

- 1 The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Skills Funding Agency (SFA) should collaborate to gather existing evidence and support new research exploring the benefits of offender learning and to establish a greater evidence base on what works.
- 2 The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Skills Funding Agency (SFA) should commission an assessment of the effectiveness of the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) system. Such a review should include:
  - a summary of the existing evidence on the effectiveness of prison education pre and post-implementation of OLASS;
  - an analysis of the relationship between educational provision and investment and outcomes for learners in prison, and
  - an assessment of stakeholder voice, including and specifically, prison educators and learners.

## Prison education contracts

- 3 The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Skills Funding Agency (SFA) should establish a timetable for the cessation of the competitive retendering of prison education contracts. In the interim, Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) contracts should be issued for a fixed term of five years (with appropriate risk management and accountability clauses) instead of the current three to five year term.

## Professionalism

- 4 The Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) should publish a timescale for establishing baseline parity of salary and terms and conditions for prison educators in line with FE lecturers.
- 5 The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) should commission a health and safety audit of prison educators' working conditions.
- 6 The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) should coordinate a nationwide campaign to improve the status of prison educators and to encourage recruitment into the profession.

## Teacher education and continuing professional development

- 7 The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) should support the development of specialist prison education modules for Initial Teacher Education programmes.
- 8 The Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) should establish guidelines on continuing professional development (CPD) provision for staff employed under OLASS contracts. In the interim, education providers applying for an OLASS contract should be required to set out how the CPD needs of its employees will be supported and funded.