

The aspirations and realities of prison education for under-25s in the London area

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The purpose of this study, undertaken in 2012, was to describe provision available for under-25s in prisons and to gain insight into the particularities of prison education. Six custodial establishments serving the London area were visited (prisons or Young Offender Institutions) and available statistical data were collected from a larger sample. Main findings were that, whilst many prisons are working hard to offer good provision, prison education is constrained in terms of the options available, and the length and level of courses. Some useful methods for addressing some of these problems were being used in different contexts. However, in conclusion, prisons need to focus more on education, training, and employment if they are to provide viable support for young prisoners as they move back into society. The proportion of education and training options at or above Level 2 should be increased.

Keywords: prison education, young offenders

Introduction

In many countries those in custody are amongst the lowest skilled and most disadvantaged in the population. In England and Wales 47 per cent of adult prisoners report that they have no qualifications compared to 15 per cent of the working population. In the US, about 70 per cent of state prisoners do not have a high school diploma (Western and Pettit, 2010). In Australia adult offenders have an average school age of Year 10 or below and training levels well below the Australian average (Callan and Gardner, 2007). In addition offenders often lack vocational skills, have poor levels of literacy and numeracy, and lack a history of steady employment (UK: Prison Reform Trust, 2013; US: Davis *et al.*, 2013; Australia: Dawe, 2007). Among young offenders there is similar disadvantage whereby young offenders are around nine times (young men) or fifteen times (young women) more likely to be unqualified compared with non-offenders of a similar age (Machin *et al.*, 2010). In addition to poor literacy, language, and numeracy skills, a high proportion of young offenders will have been excluded from school at some stage (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

From an international perspective, education and training can be seen as one of the pathways out of re-offending. Analysis by the Centre for Economic Performance (Machin *et al.*, 2010) supports the idea that improving the educational attainment of marginalized individuals can help reduce crime. Schuller (2009) identified economic, social, and moral rationales for improving lifelong learning for offenders. Evidence from the US further supports the notion that prisoners participating in educational programmes have lower rates of recidivism than non-participants (Davies *et al.*, 2013; Wilson *et al.*, 2000; Aos *et al.*, 2006).

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In an overarching recommendation, the Council of Europe (1989) proposed that ‘the right to [prison] education is fundamental’. In England and Wales it is legislated that ‘every prisoner able to profit from the education facilities provided at a prison shall be encouraged to do so’ (*Prison Rules 1999*: Rule 32). However, of the adult population in prison in England and Wales, less than a third will be receiving education of some kind (HCES, 2005). In Nordic countries participation rates are higher – for instance, participation figures for Norway in a recent report were 54 per cent (Eikeland *et al.*, 2013). Given the low levels of educational attainment amongst prisoners, these figures are problematic.

For young people in the juvenile estate (those under 18 years of age) in England and Wales, education and training fall within an aspect of the organizational structure focused on ‘reducing offending’ which has a designated outcome: ‘To deliver an education, training and employment programme which meets the needs of individuals’ (National Offender Management Service, 2012). They are expected to take part in 15 hours of education weekly, and a further 10 hours per week of purposeful activity. For those below school-leaving age there is a mandatory requirement to provide at least 15 hours of education weekly (*Young Offender Institution Rules 2000*: Rule 38).

Education and training classes in prisons are taught and delivered by a combination of teachers from the lifelong learning sector and vocational instructors. These are traditionally employed by the Prison Service, but recent government policy enables education and training to be managed by education providers. Where these two groups of teachers are employed under different conditions by different agencies, each may have allegiance to rather different kinds of culture, tradition, and ethos regarding learning, teaching, and training (Simonot *et al.*, 2008).

A great deal is expected from prison and its various departments. Society and government anticipate that a period of incarceration, treatment, and intervention can turn prisoners, many of whom have negative or fragmented life histories, away from a life of crime. Because the expectations and investments are high, prisons are under constant pressure to raise standards, provide evidence, and cope with ongoing cuts, while being subject to supervision and scrutiny from various inspectorates such as Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Ofsted.

Aims of the study

The aim of the study was to describe educational provision available for under-25s in prisons and to gain insight into the particularities of prison education. The evidence base on prison education is limited, and descriptive accounts are a necessary platform for developing effective provision.

The focus on under-25s reflects the contemporary status of young adults as taking longer to successfully negotiate the transition between childhood and adulthood. The collapse of the youth labour market and the expansion of the education system (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007) mean that education and training are becoming increasingly important for young adults. Latest figures within the UK show that 42 per cent of this age group have enrolled in higher education alone (BIS, 2011). About a quarter of the prison population of England and Wales is aged under 25 years (Berman and Dar, 2013).

The study was conducted in the London area, where the prison population is around 7,000, just under 10 per cent of the entire prison population of England and Wales ($N = 83,842$; Berman and Dar, 2013). Characteristics of the prison population in London reflect those in the rest of the country and include low attainment at school, poor self-image, high levels of mental health issues, and high levels of drug addiction (Hughes *et al.*, 2012; Simonot *et al.*, 2008). Due to the cosmopolitan nature of the capital, the number of minority-ethnic prisoners is significantly higher than in other parts of the country.

How the research was conducted

This study was undertaken over a period of nine months. A number of sources were used to gain an overview of the provision being offered. These included: interviews with education staff and with heads of learning and skills; workshops held for those involved in prison education; inspection reports; self-assessment reports (SARs); and achievement data. The sample comprised three category B prisons for adult males, one women's prison for adult women and young offenders, one category C male prison for under-25s, and three Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) for male prisoners.

The research adopted an iterative approach that took place in three stages. Involvement of participants in a collaborative approach towards understanding educational provision for the under-25s was important in the research design. Analysis of each stage led to the identification of key themes which were then explored, refined, and tested out in subsequent stages.

In stage one of the research two workshops were held for prison educators from a range of YOIs and adult prisons. During the workshops participants worked in small groups to identify examples of good practice and gaps in provision. The workshops were not recorded, but researchers took detailed field notes for further analysis.

The initial analysis from the workshops enabled the identification of key themes that formed the basis of stages two and three of the research. Themes included: teaching methods employed in prisons; what works in relation to teaching and learning; the importance of user voice; e-learning; the funding of units of assessment; and the importance of partnership and collaboration.

In stage two, visits were undertaken to six prisons. In each of the prisons semi-structured interviews were carried out with education staff, typically the education manager, and on occasion the head of learning and skills as well. The eight interviews explored issues around the aims of education and training; the range of provision offered; the achievements of learners; examples of good practice; gaps in provision and areas of concern; influences on what educational provision could be offered; and staff training.

In stage three, inspection reports, SARs, and achievement data were collected from each of the prisons. These provided detailed quantitative information on levels of provision offered, the extent to which learners completed courses and achieved qualifications, and, in the case of the inspection reports, some interviews with prisoners.

The prisons and staff who participated in this study are not named, to maintain confidentiality. For this reason, quotations are not attributed to a named institution.

Findings

Curriculum offer

In both the YOIs and the adult prisons formal education and vocational training are available. As discussed above, these two aspects of provision are frequently managed by separate services, with staff hired by different organizations. Education is under the jurisdiction of the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS), situated in the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Vocational training was traditionally under the jurisdiction of the prison service, answerable to the National Offender Management Service in the Ministry of Justice, and this was not uncommon in our sample, although this separation is now officially recognized as a potential barrier to coherent education and training provision.

Educational provision was offered part-time, often with the number of places split between morning and afternoon. For young offenders, 15 hours' education was mandatory. Vocational provision was sometimes offered on a full-time basis. In contrast to young people, adults in

prison may work full-time within the prison, which is attractive because of the wages earned. There was no education provision during the evenings or at weekends for those who worked. Prisoners under 25 were not prioritized and there were no official records of the age ranges of learners. Overall, the rates in adult provision of those participating in education averaged around 27 per cent and in vocational training around 10 per cent.

For two of the three male YOIs in the study, violent behaviour and conflict between gangs were a problem, especially where youngsters were being held from the local area. Issues arising from security concerns restricted both the range of subjects offered and access to provision. Science, for instance, was not offered due to the requirement for potentially dangerous chemicals and equipment. In some cases learners could not work together because of issues around gang membership.

In one YOI almost 50 per cent of the boys were not allowed to receive vocational training because of security risks. In this provision, project-based learning was developed in conjunction with the local education authority to support those young people not eligible for vocational work, though restrictions were still in place. For example scissors had to be plastic rather than metal. A range of topics was covered, such as 'house of the future' and 'job of the future', offering scope for creativity and imagination in an area of interest to students and with opportunities for embedded learning of functional skills. In general, project work in YOIs was seen as useful and interesting. It enabled the teaching and learning to be related to learners' lives after release and offered them the opportunity to acquire skills to raise their employability as well as being useful in everyday life.

In the vocational courses the boys are keen to work, they can concentrate and you notice that their behaviour and social skills improve. However, quite a lot of the boys are not allowed to receive vocational training because of security risks. On the straight education timetable they can be very switched off. We have introduced project-based learning to make learning more practical than formal learning. (Education manager)

The impact of security concerns on training was also a feature of provision in adult prisons, with some prisons managing better than others. So, in one case, barbering was seen as an attractive opportunity but was rejected on security grounds, whilst in another prison qualifications such as barbering were possible.

Functional skills

All adult prisons offered courses in literacy, numeracy, and ICT (Information Communications Technology) from pre-entry to Level 2, although there were not always enough places to meet demand. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses were also available, but in one case there were too few courses at pre-entry level and prisoners were enrolled on courses at too high a level. In another there were insufficient ESOL courses running.

Similarly, all YOIs offered basic English and mathematics, beginning at entry level and rising to Level 2. Entry-level qualifications are available at three levels: Entry Level 1, Entry Level 2, and Entry Level 3. Level 2 qualifications are equivalent to GCSEs – these are not the same as Entry Level 2. In some cases young people could also access Level 3 qualifications, but not in all. ESOL was not offered in all YOIs. Where it was available there were instances where it was offered at entry level only.

Overall, the majority of classes supported learning at Entry Level 3 or Level 1, with relatively few learners progressing to Level 2.

Vocational training

In both the YOIs and adult prisons, vocational training courses were offered in a range of areas. In one prison, training was available in ICT, barbering, bricklaying and multi-construction skills, catering, shoe repairs, watch and jewellery repairs, motorcycle repairs, store control, recycling, industrial cleaning, and broadcasting. In the YOIs, vocational training included barbering, brickwork, carpentry, catering, computer workshop, construction, gardening, hospitality, motorcycle maintenance, motor vehicle work, multi-skills, painting and decorating, performing arts, radio production and multimedia, and waste management and recycling. Training facilities were reported as being outstanding in many areas, with an excellent range of modern vehicles and tools. Prison radio offered a particularly good facility for prisoners to develop useful broadcasting and communication skills by making radio programmes that linked into everyday life in the prison. However, variation was apparent in the range or amount of vocational training on offer, both in prisons and YOIs, with lack of capacity and long waiting lists being mentioned as problematic in three of the six establishments visited. Despite an array of options in some establishments, it was universally reported that in real terms, opportunities for qualifications were greatly restricted compared to those available in mainstream colleges.

Throughout, there was a concern that too much provision was completed at Level 1 and was not sufficiently challenging. In one YOI, young people developed good skills and produced some complex structures while studying brickwork, but these were not accredited above Level 1 which means it is highly unlikely that they would be employed in the trade post-release.

Educational aims

Providing learners with the opportunity to gain qualifications, of any level, was seen as part of core business by most prison education staff interviewed. For young people the experience of success was seen as empowering and a necessary step to progression. Even getting young people to sit a qualification more or less on entry was a passage to studying a more challenging curriculum.

We have many dedicated staff who feel that qualifications are important and learners are also pleased to celebrate their qualifications. However, they are also aware of the need for learners to make progress in their own learning and develop soft skills. For example, the staff often refer to the change in attitude that is brought about in learners as a result of attending education classes.
(Head of Learning and Skills)

Most prison educators felt that, in addition to achievement, it was important to be able to develop the learning skills and self-image of those they worked with. As one said: 'I would like learners to gain self-confidence and work on release and be able to network ... Teaching has to reach the whole person.'

This 'holistic' learning approach was considered valuable for several reasons. Most prisoners, though not all, have a low level of educational attainment and many have retained a poor view of the statutory education they received. A very high proportion have mental and physical health issues and disabilities, often accompanied by low self-confidence and low self-esteem. In one YOI, 70 per cent of learners were classified as having some form of special educational need.

Providing a classroom context in which a learner's self-esteem can be raised was a theme running through many responses. Some teachers and managers commented that the current aim of education appeared narrow, skills-driven, and employment-oriented. The arts were often seen either as a welcome distraction or a way in for learners to take more academic classes, as illustrated by one education manager: 'For staff, the mismatch between the target/achievement-

driven environment and the need to make learning enjoyable for the learner as a lifelong goal has resulted currently in morale among staff being low'.

However, it was also argued that the current achievement-target focus should be seen in the context of the journey of prison education under OLASS and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC)/Skills Funding Agency (SFA). For all their shortcomings, achievement targets have supported a greater focus on the learner's need to have a purposeful experience and an outcome they are aware of and which has some meaning.

Only three years ago there were no achievement targets in the contract, only delivery hours. Education then often had very little purpose, as there were no monitoring benchmarks, except the fact that a teacher was in room, and it had been like that for many years. Offenders could come into class for weeks or years with no measured progress. Look at the National Audit Office report from about five years ago. One of the first teaching observations I did in OLASS was watching a class of adult offenders colour in cartoon characters photocopied from a children's book. Prison education nationally for all age groups before OLASS was over 80 per cent unsatisfactory. (OLASS Quality Development Manager)

Achievement and progression

Respondents commented that a great deal of learning which took place in prison was not captured by the statistics as achievement simply because the learner had either been released or moved on to another prison before their qualification could be completed. Within this study, levels of achievement were variable across subjects, at the level of the individual, and across institutions. One of the most prominent issues was linked to the length of stay, leaving insufficient time to achieve target qualifications. The average length of a custodial sentence for young offenders is 85 days (Ministry of Justice, 2014) and, for adults, 9.5 months (Ministry of Justice, 2013). However, due to movement within the system, an average length of stay of around eight weeks was not uncommon within one establishment. Although some prisoners stayed much longer, the short stay of many had a defining influence on the way provision was organized.

In some cases pass rates were 100 per cent. In one prison, for instance, the pass rates for health and safety, catering, and the Construction Skills Certificate Scheme were 100 per cent in 2009/10. Pass rates for industrial cleaning, multi-skills, bricklaying, and carpentry qualifications were also high: over 90 per cent. However, this level of success masked variability within prisons and YOIs. In one prison, achievement of qualifications was perceived as good, with high pass rates in cookery, functional English, Skills for Life literacy Levels 1 and 2, ESOL, preparation for work, understanding counselling theories, and personal and social development programmes. However, the level of achievement in art was poor: of the 135 learners who started the programme in the year ending August 2010, none achieved the full qualification and only 31 of these learners completed units of the qualification. Similar variation was seen across the establishment. In one YOI, 97 per cent of the young people whose length of stay allowed left with at least one nationally recognized qualification, and many left with more. By contrast, in another YOI, levels of accreditation achieved by young people were poor.

A particular issue related to those young people transferring in to YOIs with GCSEs ongoing. There was variation across establishments in the level of support provided and in achievement. In one YOI with a roll of around 240 juveniles, 91 GCSEs were achieved in one year. In another YOI with around 130 on roll, only 21 GCSEs were achieved in the same period. In some cases, when an offender transferred to a YOI during the GCSE process, the YOI enabled a learner to sit a GCSE exam but without receiving full tuition in that subject. Where possible, provision for

study at A level was made. The practical difficulties of finding study space, accessing exam papers, and setting aside sufficient time within the prison regime all stood in the way of study.

Many learners, although gaining success, were only able to take units of qualifications rather than the full qualification. This was particularly the case for those learners who spent short amounts of time in prison.

Although qualifications were offered from Entry Level to Level 2, the vast majority achieved were at Entry Level 3 or Level 1. It might be argued that this simply reflected the levels of learners, but evidence from the SAR at one large establishment suggested otherwise. Around 35 per cent of learners were at Level 1 at their initial assessment, and around 25 per cent at Level 2 or above. Typically, only about 10 per cent of learners gained qualifications above Level 1 qualifications whilst there. Examples of where there were good opportunities for longer-term prisoners to achieve qualifications up to Level 3 and beyond were rare. There was evidence that some young people repeated courses because there were no higher-level courses available in particular areas.

For offenders with higher levels of prior education there are some opportunities, at the discretion of the Governor, to study at the Open University. The Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) provides support in accessing Open University provision for adult learners. PET also provides some access to GCSE subjects and other qualifications not funded by the Prison Education Service for those in YOIs. In this study relatively few learners were studying higher level courses. In one institution approximately three per cent of prisoners were engaged in Open University or distance learning programmes and in another almost five per cent were on Open University courses. During the interviews more than one prison educator remarked on the importance of supporting learners at higher levels more effectively. However, another remarked: 'Getting someone to Level 2 takes much longer than getting them a Level 1 and it counts just the same for our (government) targets'.

Outside agencies

There was evidence of many initiatives being taken by outside agencies to fund specific courses that were immensely valuable in motivating learners. Staff in YOIs felt that working with local authorities had much potential, unlocking mainstream resources. They also mentioned that such collaboration would be helpful for young people re-entering the community.

Third-sector organizations were highly valued. For example, one respondent commented:

Over the last two to three years we have also worked with a number of other organizations to deliver short projects, including *Not Shut Up* (providing creative writing sessions), *Taking Liberties* (British Library), Anne Frank exhibition (Anne Frank Trust) and Dose (Wellcome Trust). (Prison educator)

Organizational perspectives

The setting within which prison education takes place is influenced by the prison routine, security constraints, and the relationship between the Prison Service and the education provider. One of the main criticisms of provision voiced by participants in this study was that the offer of education and training was too narrow and the provision did not have enough capacity. Many managers in this research felt that prisons should maximize opportunities for offenders to receive employment-linked training – even apprenticeships – that would be useful to them on release.

Another common issue was the disruption to education caused by aspects of the prison regime: learners being transferred to another establishment mid-way through a course; class

absences due to problems with escorting prisoners to class, or due to visits of one kind or another. A head of learning and skills said: 'People outside think we have it easy, with a captive audience. Nothing could be further from the truth. They miss classes because of visits, healthcare appointments, being stuck on the wing,¹ and then they get moved'.

Levels of attendance were improved in one YOI by close working between prison and education staff to prioritize education. This was attained by focusing on fully integrated timetables, to which two staff are dedicated, and by prioritising the way in which allocation to courses took place. A prison-wide ethos was adopted, where everyone took responsibility for ensuring that education, training, and purposeful activity was given a high status. The ethos was 'don't exclude', so that even if a prisoner was sick or confined to the wing the teachers supplied work to be done. Library attendance was encouraged and closely monitored.

Career guidance, behaviour management and resettlement provision in YOIs and adult prisons was provided by different agencies. In some cases there was inadequate communication between these and the education provision, through which valuable information and support for the offenders were lost. One education manager explained: 'The issue of multiple agencies is an issue in that there is not enough opportunity for communication and have different cultures ... In addition, the system has to function on low cost models.'

This implied frequently that, on release, prisoners were unable to identify progression routes to raise the relatively low level of qualifications they have obtained to a level that would enhance their chances of employment.

There is also a lack of consistency, with changes in both the provider of careers advice and the various names given to them. For example, they might be known as IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance), CIAS (Careers Information and Advice Service) or the National Careers Service. This impacted on educational provision making it difficult to address longer-term goals and encouraged compartmentalizing of prisoners' learning experiences.

IAG is provided by an outside agency with whom the education staff have very little possibility of meeting. The IAG personnel work is not linked to the same outcomes as that of the OLASS provision which means that they cannot pull together to meet shared goals. (Education manager)

The library was important as an opportunity for independent learning and reading. Some institutions put concerted effort into developing this resource, encouraging and monitoring its use. This resulted in a good proportion of prisoners reading and discussing a wide range of material, with the potential to enhance a range of social and employability skills.

Pedagogy and assessment

When someone arrives in prison, they are assessed for the purposes of education. Participants in this study felt that educational assessment of the learner was varied and indicated that it could range from one morning to a week-long induction programme.

Assessment 'works' sporadically. If the prisoner is on remand they are assessed but often the file arrives late so some prisoners may have been assessed eight, nine, ten times. It is symptomatic that about 75 per cent of the OU mail received is for learners who have moved on. (Education manager)

The outcomes of the assessment are then used to produce an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) which sets agreed educational targets for the learner. In one example of good practice teachers were given three hours' non-contact time per week to update the ILPs on classroom computers. Overall, the funding regime was reported as limiting the provision of tutorial time for staff; frequently there was none at all. In some cases, monthly reviews had been established in an attempt to fill this gap.

Access to education varied from recruitment on the wing to classes being undersubscribed. In general it appeared to work best when learners were able to make a selection after induction and assessment and then were told clearly if they had a place or not. In some cases they were encouraged to take up a balanced programme that incorporated Personal and Social Development, vocational courses, and functional skills but with one to three main learning aims. Some provision had waiting lists which worked well and enabled learners to slot in, thereby avoiding disappointment, but elsewhere limited places and short length of stay undermined the effectiveness of waiting lists, as one education manager explained: 'They just have to slot in where there are places, and when a place comes up they don't have long enough to finish the course.'

In some YOIs the curriculum was offered in relatively short time units, across six to seven weeks. This took account of the learners' length of stay and facilitated accreditation.

Where the curriculum was able to incorporate the interests of the learners, there was a positive response, both in the adult prisons and YOIs. Examples of this in the adult estate included radio and business enterprise, where the outcomes were correspondingly high. For example, the figures from one such class were that 80 per cent achieved accreditation. Approximately 90 per cent of the class found employment after release and the remaining 10 per cent were continuing their studies. One prison educator attributed the success of such courses to a number of factors:

- The course has concrete targets that the learner can relate to, and the content has cultural links with the learner's own background.
- They provide skills to be used in an industry that offers freelance work and self-employment.
- The course is intensive and full-time, not roll-on/roll-off, which means that learners are motivated sufficiently to give up their free-association time.
- Employability skills are integrated into the course.
- The work gains accreditation towards other courses so that these can be used post-release to continue further study.

Staff were on the whole in agreement that literacy and numeracy were unpopular when taught divorced from a vocational subject, but learning was more effective where functional skills were embedded. Young offenders, like their adult counterparts, often had an unrealistic approach to functional skills. As one teacher said: 'They want to become a plumber, but can't see the relevance of numeracy', while an education manager said: 'The success of contextualizing literacy and numeracy in prison workshops depends heavily on establishing a productive relationship between [educational and prison-led] departments'.

Behaviour management was more of an issue in YOIs than in adult prisons, where education was voluntary.

Incidents of violence are high – there is a need for different teaching approaches that are active, interactive and participative that will take care of concentration and relate to their interests ... Many learners see education as more of what they had and didn't like. (Education manager)

Most prisons in the study stated that they now had good ICT resources in the classroom. Interactive whiteboards were available in most classrooms, and some prisons had separate ICT suites that the learners could access, including resources for digital and, in some cases, sound imaging. The Internet was not available for reasons of security. Some establishments had found ways around this by providing an intranet or a virtual-learning environment that could be accessed with pre-loaded resources. It was generally felt, though, that the effective use of all these ICT resources was dependent on staff having been trained in their use, as one education manager explained: 'The Virtual Campus is a useful tool but no extra staffing costs are provided in order to make it work at optimal capacity – staff need time to upload and use it'.

All education departments were confident that their staff were appropriately qualified, and staff with specialist qualifications in literacy, numeracy, ESOL, and ICT were particularly valued for their contributions to the quality of the service. Managers quite frequently said that it was the personal qualities and attitudes of staff that were important. By this they often meant the capacity an individual had for relating to the 'difficult learner', which was a quality that some felt could not be taught. Another aspect of good practice was the ability to structure sessions (which are often three hours long, especially in YOIs) in a way that chunked time, taking account of learners' concentration span. Staff who are appropriately qualified to offer additional learning support for those with learning difficulties were identified as raising the quality of the provision.

Most managers thought that their staff formed a dedicated team, many of whom worked well beyond the hours required. At the same time there was recognition of the fact that some staff had become set in their ways and institutionalized in such a way that they were opposed to any form of change.

Many staff have worked in this environment too long; they mainly focus on accreditation which takes precedence over other considerations in learning. They need to gain a view of the bigger picture so that they can develop and move on. (Education manager)

The way the teacher is perceived was important, and younger learners especially needed to be able to identify with their teachers as role models. As one manager said: 'They want to be able to relate to young men, and preferably to young black men with whom they share an understanding of a culture'.

Staff training

Respondents in this study indicated that the use of annual appraisal as a means of identifying staff training needs was patchy. However, both staff and their managers appeared to be able to identify training needs, partly as a result of observation. Most providers allowed for four staff training days a year, especially if they were part of the further education system, but where there was a lack of understanding from the prison regime, this limited the educational focus. The staff training budget was mentioned as a restriction, as one education manager made clear: 'We always overspend our budget.'

In YOIs it was often difficult to arrange staff training because of the statutory requirements concerning hours. This was sometimes circumnavigated by internal workshops in the lunch break. In some cases regional meetings between prison education departments were organized which allow for best practice to be shared between colleagues. A number of staff mentioned the need for focused training on the embedding of functional skills.

Discussion

Education and vocational training was on offer in all YOIs and prisons, sometimes with an impressive array of vocational options. Nonetheless, the prison curriculum struggles to compete with the variety of educational options available in the community, due to the size of establishments, the unpredictable nature of enrolment, and security issues. Despite the 'captive' nature of learners, it is hard to provide a rich curriculum of education and training, well matched to students' interests and abilities in custody, and attendance levels can be frustratingly poor.

This study identified aspects of good practice on which both teaching staff and more formal quality processes, including HMIP, agreed. Solutions to the perennial problems of prison education – improving attendance rates, offering exciting training that is well aligned with employment on

release, access to potentially dangerous tools and to the Internet – had all been attempted in at least one of the prisons. It was not possible to identify which of these practices had contributed most to outcomes beyond the prison gate, such as a reduction in re-offending or raised employability. Understandably, education providers focused their attention on their provision with relatively little, perhaps too little, feedback on their impact for prisoners on release.

Three over-riding issues became apparent during the course of this study. One, rarely referenced, related to the 'age and stage' of prisoners. Another, constantly reiterated, related to the prevailing 'atmosphere' across the prison estate. The third concerns levels of achievement, identified as an issue for vocational learning in the community for 14–19 year olds (Wolf, 2011), but a much greater problem in custodial settings.

The concept of 'young people' appeared to be limited, in Prison Service terms, to a somewhat inflexible age-specific model that failed to recognize the wide range of development of young people between the ages of 15 and 25, or the appropriateness of its various interventions, including education. Adolescence is a life stage notorious for its fluidity, with its own specific norms of physical, sexual, and mental development, which seemed not to be recognized or addressed in prison after the age of 18. Younger people are part of a wider culture to which most of them will return. In that wider community, amongst under-25s, education, training, and work experience are becoming the norm. Those who cannot demonstrate their inclusion in this rite of passage are likely to be shunted into the ranks of the unemployed or into a casual and vulnerable workforce. Making a more concerted effort to include young prisoners in an enabled group makes good social sense in a number of ways; it reduces re-offending, extends social justice and offers support to the many prisoners with special needs while they are detained. Much has been done over the last 20 years to prioritize education and training for prisoners aged under 18. This effort needs to be extended to include young adults, in keeping with shifting cultural norms and the recent raising of compulsory schooling from 16 to 18 years of age.

'Atmosphere' was more difficult to define, but nevertheless much good work seemed to be done in an atmosphere of good will and co-operation, often in spite of rather than because of prevailing regimes, working conditions or budget. The barriers to good practice are well known: prison churn; uncertainty of funding and contracts; day-to-day operational dissonance between departments; dislocation from mainstream provision and practice; and the general problems of daily prison life.

The proportion of under-25s gaining qualifications above Level 1 was low, perhaps as low as 10 per cent. Wolf (2011: 7) says of even Level 2 qualifications that they have 'little to no labour market value'. The percentage of jobs requiring no qualifications or those at a low level is shrinking, reportedly to 23 per cent in the Skills and Employment Survey 2012 (Felstead *et al.*, 2013). Even within the domain of basic skills there are lacunae, such as the importance and development of oral language skills. Thus the range of ways in which provision for entry to employment might contribute to a reduction in offending have not been sufficiently implemented or tested.

Youth offending raises particular issues. Seventeen tends to be the peak age of offending internationally and the majority of young people grow out of offending by around 25, the so-called 'adolescent-limited group' (Moffitt, 1993). Unfortunately, adolescence coincides with a time when most young people are engaged in education and training and starting to define their occupational identity. The immediate consequences of disrupted education for young offenders are significant (Wilson, 2010). Many need a viable second chance at education.

In terms of issues for the future, the key emerging themes suggested that a greater focus on the age-related needs of prisoners and encouragement of education and training that leads to progression are core priorities within prisons.

Note

1. Prison accommodation is divided into 'wings' of the building.

Notes on contributors

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