

# Higher education in prisons: Access, benefits, and challenges

## Policy Brief

### Summary

Research into the impact of education in prisons has shown that it is a net positive investment. However, the particular role of higher education (HE) in prisons in England and Wales has not yet been widely considered. Engaging in HE has been found to increase a prisoner's chances of employment, encourage active citizenship and desistance from crime, and improve general wellbeing – both during and after their sentence. Prisoner participation in higher education has been estimated to cut reoffending rates by between 20-40% (Bromley Briefings, 2022; Brown & Blooms, 2018) and engaging in learning more broadly can contribute to increased active citizenship (Brosens and Croux, 2019). This report presents an overview of the current evidence in relation to HE in prisons, bringing together information from academic sources, government briefs, and commissioned reports from around the world. The report presents responses to six key questions about access, benefits, and challenges relating to HE in prisons.

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Authors: [anne.ogrady@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:anne.ogrady@ntu.ac.uk) and [tadgh.tobin@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:tadgh.tobin@ntu.ac.uk)

### Introduction

A person engaging in any level or type of education in prison results in benefits not just to that individual, but also to their community and the justice system. Engaging in HE in prison results in greater mental wellbeing, better employment prospects, and reduced likelihood of reoffending. In turn, reduced recidivism and improved chances of employment provide social and financial benefits to the community and the justice system (see: Braggins & Talbot, 2003; Coates, 2016; The Centre for Social Justice, 2021; Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011; House of Commons Education Committee, 2022; HM Government, 2006; MoJ, 2018; 2010; O'Grady & Hamilton, 2019, 2017; PRT, 2022; Saunders, 2020).

However, a number of barriers and challenges associated with accessing HE in prisons in a meaningful way have been identified by prisoners and researchers alike, including limited facilities ambivalent staff, and lack of prisoner motivation.

### Key questions

1. To what extent is HE **accessible** to people in prison in England and Wales?
2. What are the potential **benefits** of HE, both for those in prison and for the Ministry of Justice?
3. To what extent are people who have studied HE in prison more able to secure **employment** after release?
4. To what extent are people who have studied HE in prison less likely to **reoffend** after release?
5. To what extent are people who have studied HE in prison more likely to become more **socially responsible**, engaged, and active citizens?
6. What are the structural/institutional **challenges**, limitations, or barriers experienced by people who want to study HE in prison?

### 1. To what extent is HE accessible to people in prison in England and Wales?

Higher education is currently being accessed by approximately 2,000 student-prisoners in England and Wales (Prison Reform Trust, 2022). Whilst 2000, of the circa 84,000 prison population may seem a relatively small cohort, it is important to recognise that of those that could study at this level, (potentially up to 38% of the population (Bromley Briefings, 2022)) some are not serving sentences that are long enough to complete a full degree and some are serving significant sentences; under current rules, if they are not in a position to self-fund, they are not eligible to access students loans until they are at a position where they have six year or less left to serve. Prisoners may enrol on distance-learning courses with the Open University, or they can apply to take part in one of two 'Inside-Out' programmes led by the University of Greenwich (associated with HMP Downview) or Durham University (associated with HMP Frankland and HMP Low Newton).

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Studying with the Open University currently costs £19,368 for a full degree course (£3,228 per module, six modules in a course: The Open University, 2022). This can be paid for using a student loan; however, these are only accessible to students who are within six years of finishing their sentence (McFarlane, 2019). There are some scholarships and bursaries available to aid prisoners in paying for their tuition, but these are few and far between. Removing the 'six-year rule' for student loans would increase the number of students engaging in HE by 200 each year.

### 2. What are the potential benefits of HE, both for those in prison and for the Ministry of Justice?

There are many benefits for prisoners who study HE while in prison. A major benefit to the criminal justice system is the net financial gain that can be achieved by implementing and encouraging HE in prisons. An economic analysis of the impact of HE on US prisons by Sedgley et al. (2010) indicated an average saving of \$8,000 per prisoner per year, which was achieved through reduced costs of reoffending, criminal damage, etc.; this saving was found to more than offset the cost of running the programmes.

A subsequent US study by Aos and Drake (2013) indicated a projected total saving of \$21,000 per student enrolled specifically in HE. Further economic projections have indicated benefits of as much as \$19 per \$1 spent on implementing HE (Lee et al., 2015). Some of these indications consider savings from the reduced cost of reoffending, and some also incorporate the possible taxes being paid by ex-prisoners that gain employment because of their HE qualifications.

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***Engaging in education can provide people with the tools needed to develop an identity beyond their criminal identity.***

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A projection by HMPPS (2018) relating to prison education in the UK identified the costs of providing prison education courses was approximately £1,200-£1,300 per student. Analysis at this time suggested the economic benefits associated with re-offending and employment outcomes stood at approximately £6,700-£6,800 – reflecting a net benefit of £5,400-£5,600 per learner.

Engaging in HE has been shown to improve prisoners' mental wellbeing, fostering a more

positive outlook on life (Runell, 2016; Palmer-Cooper, 2018; Frerich & Murphy-Nugen, 2019; Jones & Jones, 2021). It has also been noted that artistic education for those in prisons can foster a more positive self-image (Dewey et al., 2020) and that engaging in education can provide them with the tools needed to develop an identity beyond their criminal identity and lifestyle (Giordano et al., 2002; Anders & Noblit, 2011; J-F et al., 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2018; Tønseth & Bergsland, 2019).

Additionally, it has been stated that HE improves social connectedness, allowing prisoners to build prosocial relationships with other prisoners, tutors (Duguid & Pawson, 1998; J-F et al., 2014; Jones & Jones, 2021), and in the case of Inside-Out programmes, other students (Frerich & Murphy-Nugen, 2019). This will be discussed more in response to question 5.

### **3. To what extent are people who have studied HE in prison more able to secure employment after release?**

Participating in HE in prison has the potential to positively influence post-release employment. It provides inmates with the skills needed in the current job market (Brown & Bloom, 2018), and having a degree makes them more desirable to many employers (Cho & Tyler, 2013; Tønseth & Bergsland, 2019). A degree, or other HE qualification, tends to lead to more job opportunities and is also likely to result in higher-paid employment (Cho & Tyler, 2013). Rewrite: According to Bozick et al (2018)'s meta-analysis, undertaken in the US: 'on average, the odds of obtaining post-release employment among inmates receiving correction education generally are 12% higher than the odds of obtaining post-release employment among inmates not receiving correctional education' (Bozick et al, 2018, p. 405). A UK report found that engaging with HE during one's sentence improved 12-month P45 employment by 1.8 percentage points (HMPPS, 2018). Engaging with HE also improves day-to-day efficacy/competence and provides knowledge

about how to get a job once released (Brown & Bloom, 2018; Frerich & Murphy-Nugen, 2019).

Significantly, many prisoners who engage in HE during their sentence continue their education after release (Duguid & Pawson, 1998); while this is not explicitly employment, it indicates that they are continuing to improve themselves and work towards employment as a goal (J-F et al., 2014). The added benefits of achieving employment after release include regular interactions with non-criminal associates and a move away from 'career offending' (Brown & Bloom, 2018).

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Engaging in HE while in prison can also help people to avoid gaps on their CV, and it can show they have used their time effectively, both of which further improve their chances of employment (Tønseth & Bergsland, 2019).

### **4. To what extent are people who have studied HE in prison less likely to reoffend after release?**

The research evidence shows that all types of prison education are effective in reducing recidivism; this includes academic, vocational, and artistic education (Wilson et al., 2000; Aos et al., 2006; Bozick et al., 2018; Dewey et al., 2020).

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***While all types of education show a positive impact on reoffending, HE has the largest effect.***

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There is clear evidence that all types of education have a positive impact on reoffending rates and HE has the largest effect. In one evidence review, it was found that 77% of the studies considered showed that education

significantly reduces reoffending (Bozick et al., 2018). Another study found that HE reduces reoffending by as much as 43% (Brown & Bloom, 2018). Similarly, an HMPPS (2018) review found that engaging in HE reduced reoffending by 7.5 percentage points (down to 32.6%) when compared with a non-enrolled sample (40.2% reoffended). It is also important to note that there is evidence to suggest a reduction of 7.5 percentage points in recidivism for those who had engaged in HE. It is also important to note that the reduction in recidivism rates resulting from HE engagement are increased for those who are or have served longer sentences (Cho & Tyler, 2013).

As noted elsewhere, it is thought that HE reduces reoffending by allowing people in prison to build identities beyond their criminal identity: it allows them to identify as students, widening their social circles to include other non-criminal associates, improving employment opportunities, and, for those for whom it is a factor in their offending, reducing their need to rely on crime to survive. Former prisoners, when interviewed, often cite their experience of education as a strong factor in their desistance.

### **5. To what extent are people who have studied HE in prison more likely to become more socially responsible, engaged, and active citizens?**

HE programmes in prisons such as Walls2Bridges (Canada), Inside-Out (USA, Canada, England), and Learning Together (England) have shown their benefits in relation to social responsibility and active citizenship, and these are commonly cited in research (Frerich & Murphy-Nugen, 2019; O'Grady & Hamilton, 2019). Such programmes are reported to improve social connectedness and provide a feeling of 'normalcy' and belonging in a community, alongside developing the social skills necessary to successfully reintegrate into society upon release. Engaging in HE while in prison is also seen to improve a prisoner's confidence and independence.

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***Prisoners ... develop a prosocial attitude and feel more involved in their community.***

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Some have reflected that their decision to engage in HE in prison was not linked to future employment prospects, but rather was a means to develop a strong sense of personal social responsibility, give back to their community once they are released, or to become a positive role model for their siblings or children (Jones & Jones, 2021). Prisoners are seen to develop a prosocial attitude and feel more involved in their community while participating in education; this is especially true for Inside-Out style programmes, in which current students studying in mainstream HE study alongside HE students in prison.

As noted previously, HE helps build prosocial relationships both within and outside prison, contributing to a prosocial identity. This prosocial identity is linked to wanting to be a part of a community and to engage meaningfully with it, either through volunteering, participating in community events, or facilitating positive community interactions.

### **6. What are the structural/institutional challenges, limitations, or barriers experienced by people who want to study HE in prison?**

Recent reports (Coates, 2016, HC, 2022) in the UK identified that people in prison experience several significant barriers to accessing HE and challenges that limit their active engagement in such programmes. In various studies and reports, people have stated that they cannot find the time to study, nor do they have dedicated/suitable study spaces.

A lack of time and space to study makes it difficult to complete work or use resources, in turn making it difficult to pass – or even complete – a course. This is a strong deterrent from engaging in HE in prison.

There are also reports of a distinct lack of peer and staff support and encouragement. Staff not being willing to support people in their applications for student finance or university courses while in prison significantly inhibits their access to HE programmes and the benefits they provide. Some studies detailed reports that staff were actively inhibiting access or were rebuking prisoners for attempting to access HE. Additionally, a lack of support from peers discourages engagement in HE programmes.

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***The fact that prisons are struggling – or indeed are reluctant for security reasons – to enable prisoners access to the internet is a substantial limitation to the viability of providing ... HE.***

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Another prisoner-identified reason not to engage with HE is a fear of debt. Many people indicated they were worried about having a large debt ‘hanging over them’ as soon as they were released from prison, and they were concerned about not being able to pay this back if they could not find employment. Furthermore, prisoners reported a general fear of engaging in a programme that could be cancelled at any moment due to budgets or general politics, or that they may be transferred to a new prison and then may be unable to continue their studies.

There are also some systemic and institutional barriers to implementing a meaningful and modern system of HE in the prison estate. Universities are fully reliant on technology and the internet to deliver their courses and even enrol their students. The fact that prisons are struggling, or are indeed reluctant for security reasons, to enable prisoners’ safe access to the internet is a substantial limitation to the viability of providing a system-wide HE offer in prisons. However, there is evidence that some initiatives, such as Learning Together, have successfully provided a digital HE programme into prisons

for the sole purpose of education. Palmer-Cooper (2018) and others (e.g., Farley et al., 2016) report the challenges of limited technology, including access to virtual learning environments and wider study materials, tutorial and peer-support, as well as email communication.

While much of the evidence relating to education in prison focuses on the male estate, Brown and Bloom (2018) identified that female prisoners faced further barriers to engaging in HE in addition to those already noted. These barriers include the reality that women’s prisons are more likely to be under-resourced when compared to the male estate (Rafter, 1985; see also: Fossi, 2005; HCEC, 2022; HMIP, 2022). This is particularly important as Rodermond et al. (2016) observed that education is likely to have more significant impact on women’s desistance.

## Conclusion

Although education in prison should, as much as possible, reflect the educational provision of the society in which the prisoner resides, there is evidence that this is not the case in England (HC, 2022; Coates, 2016). A system-wide HE

offer should be a key component of the prison education system in England and Wales, as this would provide notable economic and social benefits.

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***A system-wide HE offer should be a key component of the prison education system in England and Wales.***

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