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Research and analysis

Education recovery in prisons

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Applies to England

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The picture overall

Between May and October 2021, Ofsted looked at the progress that prison leaders and managers were making to reinstate the full education, skills and work curriculum. Over the course of 41 progress monitoring visits, we examined the fundamental components of quality of education, including:

- leadership strategy
- access to the curriculum
- learning support for prisoners

We had already identified these aspects as a concern during many of our interim visits to prisons between January and May 2021.

The provision of education, skills and work has been severely curtailed by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) from the start of the pandemic. However, we expected prison leaders and governors to have implemented appropriate and effective recovery plans by the time of their progress monitoring visit.

What we found instead was an overall picture of slow progress. At a time when leaders and managers should have been accelerating their progress towards curriculum recovery, only 2 of the establishments we visited were making significant progress. Approximately a quarter were making insufficient progress.

Prison leaders and managers remained cautious about allowing prisoners to participate in education, skills and work. Very few prisoners were able to engage in education, but the provision for them was generally of good quality. Overall, there was not enough support for prisoners to continue learning during this period. This is especially true for those with additional learning needs.

The leaders of the 2 prisons making significant progress continued to put education at the heart of their establishment throughout the pandemic. These establishments demonstrate what is possible, given sufficient determination to provide much-needed learning opportunities for prisoners.

We understand that prisons are not just a place of education and that prison leaders face competing demands of ensuring safety, security and well-being for prisoners and staff. We acknowledge that balancing these with providing education and training has been even more challenging during the pandemic.

However, the consequences of sacrificing education must also be acknowledged. Without access to education and training or adequate advice and guidance, prisoners are less likely to gain employment on release and more likely to reoffend. [\[footnote 1\]](#) The Ministry of Justice estimates that the overall cost of reoffending was £18.1 billion in 2019. After 2 years of missed opportunities, there will be a significant cost – both for the future life chances of individual prisoners and to society.

As restrictions continue to ease, leaders must urgently increase prisoners' participation in education, skills and work by drawing on all available resources. Prison leaders and managers must show flexibility, ingenuity and focus if they are to improve prisoners' chances of resettlement in such challenging circumstances.

Methodological note

This briefing uses evidence collected during 41 progress monitoring visits to examine the fundamental components of quality of education, including:

- leadership strategy
- access to the curriculum
- learning support for prisoners and young offenders

Ofsted carried out progress monitoring visits as part of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons' (HMIP) full inspections between May and October 2021. In addition, we did a number of visits on our own. We selected the prisons that had been graded inadequate or requires improvement for the overall effectiveness of education, skills and work at their previous full inspection. We also prioritised the prisons that had not received an interim visit in the earlier part of 2021. All visits were carried out on site by 2 inspectors, who followed health and safety controls at each establishment.

During each visit, inspectors looked at 4 specific themes. They evaluated the progress that prison leaders were making towards reinstating the full education, skills and work curriculum; the quality of teaching and learning delivered at the time of the visit; the effectiveness of the careers advice and guidance offered to prisoners; and the quality of learning support they received. Inspectors looked at these themes across all prisons where weaknesses had been identified at interim visits between January and May 2021.

Inspectors awarded a judgement of insufficient, reasonable or significant progress to each prison visited:

- only 2 prisons were making significant progress
- 28 were making reasonable progress
- 11 were making insufficient progress

Inspectors were only able to provide a single judgement of progress, after having considered each of the 4 visit themes. Many prisons were doing better in 1 or 2 of the themes, so in balance this led to many 'reasonable progress' judgements. It is our expectation that prisons should have been making significant progress during this recovery period. Therefore, this is not good enough.

The state of prison education in 2021

Maximising participation

Leaders have been slow to maximise prisoners' participation in face-to-face education, skills and work activities.

At the time of our visits, the number of prisoners participating in education, skills and work was increasing, albeit slowly. Their participation in learning was still a lot lower than pre-pandemic levels. In some cases, no classroom activity had taken place since March 2020.

Too many prison leaders had taken a cautious approach to reintroducing face-to-face classes. This has had the most negative impact on prisoners who find it difficult to learn independently, for example those with low levels of literacy and numeracy, those who speak English as an additional language and those who have additional learning needs. In a few cases, prison leaders provided one-to-one outreach support to these groups.

Pandemic-related restrictions, such as limits on the number of learners in a classroom, have reduced the number of prisoners who can take part in face-to-face education. Leaders have therefore had to prioritise which prisoners they offer these opportunities to. Some leaders have prioritised those who have already engaged well with remote education rather than those with the greatest need for support.

We saw some good examples where participation was increased despite restrictions, including where prisons were using trained peer-mentors to supplement teaching. In one prison, managers

had set up additional classrooms so that more prisoners could be taught, even if in smaller groups. However, most leaders had not thought creatively enough to ensure that they maximised participation in face-to-face education while complying with restrictions.

Information, advice and guidance

In too many cases, prisoners were not being provided with high-quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) to help them plan for their release.

In some prisons, too few prisoners had completed an appropriate induction to education, skills and work because IAG staff were still working through backlogs that had built up over the pandemic. IAG staff were also absent from prisons for many months from March 2020.

Too many prisoners that we spoke to were not aware of the education options available to them. In one prison, classes were not at full capacity for this reason. This meant that many prisoners were not accessing the available courses that would support their learning goals or resettlement plans.

Even when inductions had been completed, some IAG services did not carry out regular reviews of prisoners' progress towards their career goals or provide timely support before their release.

Quality of education

The few education, skills and work activities that were taking place were generally of a good quality. However, the support and resources available did not meet the needs of all learners.

We found that the quality of work packs had improved since they were first introduced. This was due to collaborative working between prison leaders and education providers. The prisoners we spoke to also felt well supported by their teachers to work through the packs, and teachers tended to give useful written feedback on how they could improve.

However, some teachers did not make sure that prisoners had a chance to practise and correct their mistakes before moving on to other topics. In addition, in-cell work packs did not meet some prisoners' learning needs. Prisoners with additional learning needs require more support and can find it difficult to learn independently using a paper pack. At the other end, we found that the activities in Level 2 packs were sometimes not challenging enough for more advanced prisoners.

The range of courses that had been adapted into work packs was limited. The main subjects covered by work packs were English and mathematics. There were not enough work packs on

vocational subjects. As prisoners were largely unable to access workshops, they had limited opportunities to learn practical knowledge and skills necessary for securing employment on release.

Beyond the provision of these work packs, the resources available to support prisoners with remote learning were scarce. Several prisons were using channels of communication such as in-cell educational TV to deliver curriculum content. However, many were not making full use of the available methods for communication. Prisoners also frequently had difficulty accessing other resources they needed to complete work, such as dictionaries, calculators and textbooks.

We saw 2 examples of prisons using technology to ensure that a broader range of learning needs were met during the pandemic. In these prisons, a small number of prisoners had laptops. Prisoners who spoke English as an additional language could access computer programmes to develop their communications skills, and prisoners who wanted to start their own business on release could access business-related courses.

However, we also found that prisons did not prioritise enough developing prisoners' digital skills, which are necessary for them to succeed in the workplace on release. Access to digital learning platforms, such as Virtual Campus, was minimal.

The small amount of face-to-face education that was taking place during our visits was of a high quality. Prisoners benefited from being able to ask questions and receive immediate feedback from teachers. Teachers took the time to explain concepts and ensure that prisoners understood before moving on to the next topic. We found that prisoners valued these face-to-face sessions highly. Prisoners were attentive during classes.

As prisoners returned to the classroom, staff in most prisons assessed prisoners to identify any gaps in learning due to the pandemic. However, they did not always use this information to plan the curriculum in a way that would meet these needs and help them to catch up with missed learning.

Support for learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities

Just as we found in our recent [review of reading education in prisons](#), those prisoners with the greatest need generally received the least support to continue learning through the pandemic. There was insufficient support for prisoners identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Our inspectors identified 3 main areas of weakness in the support systems for prisoners with SEND: the identification of, communication about and teaching support for SEND. Most prisons performed well in one or two of these areas but not in all.

The government has recently mandated that all prisoners be screened for SEND on entry to the prison system. Despite this, we found that a concerning number of prisons were still relying on prisoners to declare their own SEND. In some of the prisons we visited, prisoners known to the education department were screened but those in work or industries were not.

In addition, prisoners sometimes had to complete basic SEND assessments in their cells due to restrictions. We found that some managers had not returned to in-depth face-to-face screening once restrictions eased. Prisons must ensure that all prisoners are screened appropriately so that their learning needs can be met.

In some prisons, education staff had identified prisoners' SEND effectively and put appropriate support in place. However, these needs were not communicated to staff on residential units or in workplaces. Consequently, prisoners did not receive the support they needed outside of the education department to continue learning and progressing as well as they could.

Sadly, most of the prisons we visited did not have sufficient specialist support in place to meet the additional learning needs of their population. There were some resources used to support dyslexic prisoners but there were insufficient resources for those with more complex needs, such as autism or behavioural difficulties. In part, this is due to a lack of staff with the specialist expertise required to develop comprehensive support plans and provide one-to-one support.

The current state of prison education

We returned to routine inspection at the end of October 2021. We have carried out 14 inspections jointly with HMIP up to the beginning of March 2022. The picture for the overall effectiveness of education, skills and work remains bleak. Of inspections with reports published so far, 3 prisons were graded requires improvement and 1 was judged to be inadequate for the provision of education, skills and work.

Crucially, leaders and managers are not yet prioritising the provision of education sufficiently. Education spaces are not fully used. In the vast majority of inspections, we found that only a handful of prisoners were engaged in education, skills and work.

All prisons were moved back under restrictions following the emergence of the Omicron variant in December 2021. At that time, very little education, skills and work activity was permitted: this was another step back in prisons' recovery plans.

An increased number of COVID-19 outbreaks has led to staff absences at all levels, including managers, who have also had to turn their hand to operational issues. This has meant that leadership activities, such as planning for an effective curriculum and assuring the quality of

education, have been neglected.

Overall, prisons are being too slow to reinstate their full education, work and skills curriculum. In this climate, the prison regime has regressed to the poor levels we saw in October 2021, offering little activity to prisoners to support their resettlement objectives.

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1. ['Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education: A meta-analysis of programs that provide education to incarcerated adults'](#), RAND Corporation, 2013. ↩

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