



# BRIEFING NOTE

November 2008

Series briefing note 12

The City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) is an independent, not for profit research and development body which is committed to improving the policy and practice of work-related education and training internationally. It is part of the City & Guilds Group.

This briefing note forms part of a series of notes produced by CSD on issues affecting the global vocational education and training sector. These notes aim to briefly summarise and compare existing research, policy and practice in different countries, and to use this to develop general principles as a starting point for debate among education stakeholders. For more comprehensive information on specific issues please refer to the further reading sections of the notes, or contact CSD directly.

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN PRISONS

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [Policy approaches and funding for programmes](#)
3. [Specific challenges](#)
4. [What type of education?](#)
5. [Employment prospects](#)
6. [Wider support needs](#)
7. [Policy suggestions](#)
8. [Recommended further reading](#)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Adult offenders show a consistently lower than average level of educational achievement. They often have low levels of literacy and numeracy and a record of poor school attendance and unemployment.<sup>1</sup> These factors, combined with other difficulties such as substance abuse and the stigma attached to a criminal record, can make it difficult for ex-prisoners to secure and keep good employment upon release, making their reintegration into society a challenging task. Most justice systems in the developed world seek to address this by providing some form of training or education programmes within prisons. This paper will examine the various issues at stake and the place of vocational education and training within a wider approach to education within prisons. It will argue that skills training for prisoners is vital but that it must recognise that many prisoners have wider support needs, and educational needs at a more basic level, which must be addressed for skills training to be effective in helping them secure rewarding, permanent employment.

### 2. POLICY APPROACHES AND FUNDING FOR PROGRAMMES

Broadly speaking, education programmes in prisons can be seen as having three major benefits:

- They can help to mitigate the inherent negative social effects of incarceration.
- They are part of a wider lifelong learning offer to those who previously had limited educational opportunities.
- They can assist with efforts to rehabilitate prisoners and help them desist from crime upon release.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dawe, S. (2007). *Vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia: Research readings*. Adelaide: NCVER.

<sup>2</sup> Warner, K. (2005). *Against the narrowing of perspectives: how do we see learning, prisons and prisoners?* Presentation to the *Australian Corrections Education Association Conference*, Darwin.



In the context of vocational education and training, the third benefit is especially important, as moving into legitimate and rewarding employment is a key factor in moving away from a life of crime. Participation in educational programmes aimed at improving job skills or addressing specific problems such as substance abuse has been associated with reduced recidivism (that is, rates of repeat arrest, prosecution and/or imprisonment after release). These programmes are based on the view that unless those released from prison have the skills needed to obtain and keep a job, they are likely to find themselves back in the same circumstances that produced their criminal behaviour in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

Policy approaches to education and training in prisons are, however, vulnerable to changes in the political climate, as prevailing views about the core purpose of prison change. In the 1970s, views emphasising the rehabilitative role of prison – preparing offenders to return to society – began to give way to a more punitive view in many developed countries, particularly the USA. To varying degrees, policy in these countries still reflects this more sceptical approach to rehabilitation, and it has been argued that there continues to be a culture among some prison staff that is hostile to the idea of the prison as a place for training and education as well as for correction.<sup>4</sup> This is reflected in difficulties in obtaining and keeping funding for educational programmes in prisons, which is vulnerable to cuts despite the emergence of clearer evidence linking training and recidivism rates.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

#### *a) Compulsory or voluntary?*

By requiring prisoners to show good behaviour and a willingness to reintegrate, many jurisdictions have, arguably, made participation in training programmes effectively compulsory for prisoners to be considered for parole. This could be seen as making sensible use of the incentives available within a prison environment, but others have argued that denying prisoners ownership of the decision to train can limit successful course completion.<sup>6</sup> Compulsory training may also replicate the resistance to education experienced by many inmates at school. Furthermore, in many countries, prisoners are effectively obliged to participate in educational programmes but have no guarantees that suitable programmes will be available.<sup>7</sup> Arguably, in order to be effective, education in prisons should follow similar guidelines to adult education in general, including the principle that adults learn best when the decision to return to learning is their own and the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly.<sup>8</sup>

#### *b) A consistent and coherent training offer*

Establishing a coherent training offer for prisoners presents particular challenges. In the UK, tensions between different objectives (e.g. meeting learning needs versus keeping prisoners occupied; providing regular training and access to resources versus maintaining security) have made training provision in prisons fragmented. There is also wide variation in the training available at different prisons, so a prison transfer can effectively terminate a prisoner's studies.<sup>9</sup>

#### *c) Provision for short-term prisoners*

Given the multiple challenges many prisoners face and their generally low starting level, it may be unrealistic to seek to offer prisoners training beyond the basic skills level if they are incarcerated for a short period of time. In the UK, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts has recommended that short term prisoners should be a priority for programmes aimed at getting offenders into local employment on release or signposting them

<sup>3</sup> Spangenberg, G. (2004). Current issues in correctional education: a compilation and discussion. *Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy Paper*.

<sup>4</sup> Callan, V. & J. Gardner (2007). The role of VET in recidivism in Australia. In Dawe, S. (ed.) *Vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia: research readings*. Adelaide: NCVER.

<sup>5</sup> Spangenberg (2004), *ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> Giles, M., A. Tram Le, M. Allan, C. Lees, A. Larsen & L. Bennett (2004). To train or not to train: the role of education and training in prison to work transitions. *NCVER paper*.

<sup>7</sup> de Graaff, P. (2007). Should education and vocational training be compulsory in corrections? In Dawe, S. (ed.) *Vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia: research readings*. Adelaide: NCVER.

<sup>8</sup> National Adult Literacy Agency of Ireland, [Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work](#)

<sup>9</sup> House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2008). *Meeting needs? The Offenders' Learning and Skills Service*. London: House of Commons.



towards further training in the community.<sup>10</sup> It is unclear, however, if meaningful results can be achieved for such prisoners.

#### **d) Evidence of the benefits of training**

Research into the benefits of training in prisons presents a number of challenges: early research was difficult to generalise to the wider population, and many research participants proved difficult to track over time.<sup>11</sup> Recent studies, most notably the *Three State Recidivism Study* in the US, have attempted to address these research concerns and found that participants in educational programmes had lower rates of recidivism. The study did not, however, look at what types of education programme had been followed or the length of time the participants had spent in the programmes.<sup>12</sup> Despite these gaps, the study has been used to good effect to generate stakeholder support for education programmes in prisons, with the State of Maryland using it to illustrate that for every dollar invested in prison education, two dollars in prospective re-incarceration costs could be saved.<sup>13</sup>

## **4. WHAT TYPE OF EDUCATION?**

### **a) “Corrective education”**

Many prison education programmes focus on tackling “criminogenic” factors<sup>14</sup> in individuals’ lifestyles, including issues like substance abuse and anger management. This can affect funding: in Canada, for instance, a successful humanities programme run by Simon Fraser University was discontinued because it did not address “criminogenic factors”.<sup>15</sup> Corrective education may, in many cases, be a prerequisite for successful further training, particularly for younger offenders, for whom education and training appear to have a smaller impact on recidivism. For young people who are heavily embedded in crime, true change may only occur if there is a massive change in the way they view the world and the way they evaluate the consequences of their actions, which can only start when they are willing to participate actively in the process.<sup>16</sup> In such cases, focusing on criminogenic factors to bring about this change in perception and attitude before addressing work skills is a rational approach.

In many developed countries, however, public discourse and practice around prison education arguably centres on corrective education almost to the exclusion of other approaches. The co-ordinator of the prison education service in Ireland, Kevin Warner, has argued that this approach, which sees prisoners only as “offenders” rather than as complex individuals, reinforces feelings of failure and fails to address wider matters that are key to the prisoner establishing a successful life upon release, such as housing, relationships, work and self-esteem.<sup>17</sup> He points out that this goes against the Council of Europe’s best practice recommendations, which state that “the education of prisoners must, in its philosophy, methods and content, be brought as close as possible to the best adult education in society outside”.<sup>18</sup>

### **b) Basic skills**

Prisoners tend to have low levels of educational achievement. A New Zealand study in 2001 found that three quarters of male and female prisoners had left school without educational qualifications.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, many prisoners’ skills levels in basic areas such as literacy and numeracy would be sufficient to exclude them from a large

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Graffam, J. & L. Hardcastle (2007). Ex-prisoners and ex-offenders and the employment connection: assistance plus acceptance. In Dawe, S. (ed.) *Vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia: research readings*. Adelaide: NCVER.

<sup>12</sup> Steurer, S., Smith, L. & Tracy, A. (2001). OCE/CEA Three State Recidivism study. *Correctional Education Association paper*.

<sup>13</sup> Spangenberg (2004), *ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> Warner, K. (2005), *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> Duguid, S. (2000). *Can Prisons Work? The prisoner as object and subject in modern corrections*. Toronto: University of Toronto press.

<sup>16</sup> Bushway, S. (2003). Employment Dimensions of Re-entry: Understanding the nexus between prisoner re-entry and work. *Urban Institute Re-entry Roundtable discussion paper*.

<sup>17</sup> Warner, K. (2005), *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> Council of Europe (1990). *Education in Prison*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

<sup>19</sup> Giles et al. (2004), *ibid*.



number of jobs. For this reason, many programmes in prisons have focused on literacy and numeracy. For many prisoners, moving to more advanced vocational training may be an unrealistic goal unless these basic skills needs are first addressed.

### **c) Vocational education and training (VET)**

Beyond these fundamental training needs, the principle of enabling prisoners to re-integrate into society on release by promoting their access to decent employment implies the provision of vocational training. Such provision varies widely between countries and often between individual prisons, as does the balance between the numbers of prisoners who engage in study and those who choose paid work instead during their sentence. In many countries, the possibility of earning money from paid (usually menial) work arguably disincentivises prisoners from training.<sup>20</sup>

Research in Australia has found that participation in vocational training programmes before release was a predictor of desistance from crime, with 32% of those who did not participate before their initial release returned to custody within 2 years, compared to 23% of vocational education and training participants.<sup>21</sup> As noted above, however, the link between training and recidivism is not simple; success depends on a number of wider support factors and prisoners' ability to find skilled work on release.

## **5. EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS**

Employment status is a key predictor of the likelihood of recidivism. Most people who re-offend are unemployed at the time.<sup>22</sup> The quality of the job is also a factor: "good jobs" and "meaningful work" appear to reduce the likelihood of criminal behaviour, both economic and non-economic crimes.<sup>23</sup> There would appear, therefore, to be a case for providing inmates with the type of skills training that will enable them to take on more satisfying work upon release.

Ex-prisoners, however, face great challenges in making the transition to a legal and economically productive lifestyle, and training alone will not address all of these. They face prejudice from potential employers, arguably more so in countries where employers have access to the criminal records of job applicants. A 2001 British study found that employer discrimination was the most common labour market disadvantage faced by ex-prisoners, and that few employers had an equal opportunities policy covering offenders or felt that such policies should include them.<sup>24</sup> Evidence also indicates, however, that employers are less worried about the possibility of a repeat crime on their premises than about whether ex-offenders will be good employees.<sup>25</sup> Efforts to teach prisoners basic work skills and to promote contact between employers and prisoners in training programmes may therefore pay off in terms of countering employers' preconceptions about offenders' suitability for the workplace.

A number of schemes have established links between training programmes in prisons and local employers, to increase prisoners' chances of securing employment on release. In the UK, the governor of Hull prison is working with a local employers' forum, the local authority and the Regional Development Agency to identify skills gaps in the local labour market which prisoners could fill.<sup>26</sup> In addition to improving engagement with employers, there may also be a case for developing prisoners' ability to work for themselves. Evidence shows that a majority of prisoners engaged in vocational education and training express a desire to be self-employed on release from custody, in part in order to escape the stigma faced by ex-prisoners when seeking employment.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Giles et al. (2004), *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Callan, V. & J. Gardner (2005). Vocational education and training provision and recidivism in Queensland correctional institutions. *NCVER paper.*

<sup>22</sup> Graffam & Hardcastle (2007), *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Uggen, C. (1999). Ex-offenders and the conformist alternative: a job quality model of work and crime. *Social Problems* 46(1): 127-51.

<sup>24</sup> Fletcher, D., A. Taylor, S. Hughes & J. Breeze (2001). Recruiting and employing offenders: the impact of the Police Act. *Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Work and Opportunity series paper.*

<sup>25</sup> Bushway (2003), *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2008), *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Callan & Gardner (2007), *ibid.*



## 6. WIDER SUPPORT NEEDS

Giving prisoners new skills is not sufficient to enable them to make a successful transition to life upon release. For many offenders, this requires the construction of a whole new social reality: old networks need to be abandoned and entirely new networks of friends and social supports need to be constructed to replace existing networks that probably supported the person's involvement in crime.<sup>28</sup> In addition, issues such as housing and health present particular challenges for many former prisoners. Releasing an offender with no support other than minimal job search assistance means expecting him or her to manage this process alone, but many offenders may struggle with this.<sup>29</sup> Programmes that seek to provide ex-prisoners with this wider support, in addition to addressing their education needs during their sentence, have shown encouraging results in terms of low recidivism rates and reintegration into society.

Based on employer concerns about ex-offenders' work records, the single most important thing that any ex-offender can do may be to get and keep one job for a significant period of time, beyond the short term when the benefits of crime may well appear larger than the benefits of legitimate work.<sup>30</sup> Clearly skills training can play an important role here, but only in the context of a wider programme that addresses any criminogenic factors and – importantly – that offers support beyond initial job placement to help ex-offenders stay in the job for a meaningful length of time.

### Addressing wider support needs in Victoria

In Victoria, Australia, the Corrections Service Employment Pilot Programme begun in 2002 was designed to recognise the need for long-term support, the likelihood of slow and intermittent progress, the need for basic skill development and pre-employment preparation, and the need for other services such as housing, health services and personal support. Participants in the programme were found to have a re-offending rate half that of non-participants, and those that re-offended were convicted of significantly less serious crimes.

Source: Graffam & Hardcastle (2007), *ibid*.

## 7. POLICY SUGGESTIONS

- All new prisoners should be screened for learning and skills needs, taking due account of corrective education and basic skills training needs before considering potential for further skills training.
- To reduce disruption from prison transfers, a core offer of basic and vocational skills most likely to be marketable on release should be widely available across prisons and a cross-prison system for sharing training records should be established.
- Training courses should include enterprise training to assist prisoners who wish to become self-employed on release.
- Incentives systems within prisons should give equal weight to training and work programmes.
- Using examples of good practice, local employers should be engaged with training schemes in prisons to help learners establish contacts with potential employers and to reduce prejudice against ex-offenders.
- Training should be offered as part of a broader system of pre- and post-release support.
- Further research should be conducted into the most effective training offer for short term prisoners.

<sup>28</sup> Bushway (2003), *ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Bushway (2003), *ibid*.



---

## 8. RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Spangenberg, G. (2004). Current issues in correctional education: a compilation and discussion. *Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy Paper*.

Chris Sims, November 2008. [Chris.Sims@skillsdevelopment.org](mailto:Chris.Sims@skillsdevelopment.org)

**City & Guilds Centre  
for Skills Development**  
24-30 West Smithfield, London,  
EC1A 9DD, United Kingdom  
t: +44 (0)20 7294 2796  
w: [www.skillsdevelopment.org](http://www.skillsdevelopment.org)  
e: [info@skillsdevelopment.org](mailto:info@skillsdevelopment.org)