

# EDUCATION IN PRISONS: A SOLUTION TO A CRISIS

## Co-producing safe spaces for learning to enable healthier prisons and to support reintegration into the community

### Summary

Prisons in England and Wales are in crisis. The current situation has been a long time in the making, and exacerbated in the post-Covid pandemic period.

Deaths, assaults and self-harm have all been increasing in recent years. This is partly due to the substantial increases in the number of people held in prison, as well as long-term neglect to buildings, staff development and the availability of purposeful activities.

The situation is unsustainable and needs urgent attention. Problems within our prisons spill out into our cities and communities when harmed humans, both prisoners and staff, leave these institutions.

Whilst no single policy or initiative can reduce the harm, it is clear that creating safe spaces for education and learning must be at the heart of long-term change for healthier prisons. This must apply to prison staff as well as people serving sentences of imprisonment.

Findings from research published by a DMU member of staff provide insights for creating safer learning spaces in prisons.

### Introduction

Prisons are typically overlooked when it comes to public policy priorities. They have been relatively easy to ignore by politicians who may decide there are worthier, or easier, priorities for public resources.

A tendency towards dehumanising rhetoric and sensationalised narratives in mainstream media over a long period have contributed to a context in which prisons and the people they contain have been neglected.

This approach may be seductive in the short-term, but is unsustainable in the long-run. We have reached a point in England and Wales where the risks and dangers associated with this approach are being realised on a regular basis.

The Independent Sentencing Review chaired by David Gauke, for example, found that capacity pressures brought the prison system “dangerously close to collapse” in 2024 (Gauke, 2025: 7).

There are costs associated with such neglect. According to UK government data, deaths, assaults and self-harm in prisons have all been increasing since Spring 2021.

This is partly because the number of people detained has increased substantially since then by some 10,000 people, or about 13 per cent (MoJ/HMPPS, Safety in Custody Statistics, April 2025).

Dangers inherent in prisons have hit the headlines, with coverage focusing on, to pick several examples from April 2025, violence towards staff in HMP Frankland (BBC, 17 April), the Prison Officer’s Association demand for electric stun guns (BBC, 21 April) and the introduction of PAVA, a synthetic pepper spray, for staff to use in young offender institutions (Sky News, 24 April).

### Key recommendations

- ⇒ Promote and protect the right to education in prison, including opportunities for higher-level learning.
- ⇒ Create safe spaces for education and learning in prisons. In turn, this supports the creation of healthy prisons.
- ⇒ Solve problems of availability and accessibility of (higher) education opportunities for all people in prison, particularly for those serving long sentences.
- ⇒ Recognise and promote the value of abstracted questions and discussion to generate interactions in low-trust contexts that enhance the pedagogical capital of learners
- ⇒ Create opportunities for learning that recognise the particular circumstances of people in prison and their humanity, including opportunities to co-produce education and learning courses.
- ⇒ Provide support to staff who would like to enhance their education by engaging in higher-level learning opportunities.

The latter was introduced against the advice of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, an arms-length body funded by government itself.

The importance of healthy prisons has been long recognised, and this is reflected in the inspection criteria deployed by His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP, 2025).

Inspectors assess the performance of prisons and young offender institutions using four healthy prison tests encompassing – safety; respect/care; purposeful activity (prisoners being able to engage in activity that benefits them), and preparation for release/resettlement (a core prison function to facilitate the maintenance and development of relationships with family and friends, and preparation for release back into the community).

Good education provision contributes to all four aspects of the healthy prison. The decline in the health of prisons has been widespread, but not universal, with specialist and open prisons tending to fare better (Rowland and Pope, 2025).

In the context of intense capacity pressure, rising levels of violence and protest, together with relatively inexperienced staffing, the negative

impact on purposeful activity is unsurprising. Whilst the precise causal relationship between purposeful activity, violence and protest is unclear, The Institute for Government's work shows that "...there is a strong association between higher levels of purposeful activity and lower levels of violence and protest and so a return to more normal levels of purposeful activity could help lower violence and improve outcomes" (Rowland and Pope, 2025: 25).

They recommend establishing a 'minimum regime' across prisons – adequately funded and with targets on purposeful activity. Such purposeful activity, particularly educational and training courses, are crucial to reintegration efforts and may help bring down rising violence in custody.

Engagement with education can significantly reduce reoffending. A 2017 review found that the proven one-year reoffending rate is 34% for prisoner learners, compared to 43% for people who don't engage in any form of learning (Ministry of Justice and Department for Education, 2017).

In order to be eligible for a student loan, prisoners wishing to study with a higher education institution must be within six years of their release date. This limits available opportunities, particularly for people serving long prison sentences. Prisoner participation in higher education has been estimated to cut reoffending rates by 20–40 per cent (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2019).

My research has found benefits for people in prison engaging in informal learning opportunities, for the sake of learning. It is in society's interests to promote the benefits of access to education for all people, whether they are detained in prison, or not.

The human right to education has been acknowledged in both international and domestic law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26), for example, states: 'Everyone has the right to education', implying that the right to education and training applies to all persons, including all persons in prison (cited by Vorhaus, 2014). Similarly, article two of the first protocol of The Human Rights Act states that 'no person shall be denied a right to an education' (Human Rights Act, 1998, Part II Article 2).

The rights and entitlements of people in prison are frequently forgotten, not prioritised or actively undermined. In recent years, the gap has widened between the educational opportunities available in the communities of England and Wales and the opportunities available in prison.

This problem has a number of causes, including political neglect, a misconceptualisation of the purposes of education in prison, and a growing disconnect between access to learning resources in prison relative to the outside world.

If this gap is permitted to grow further, there are further reduced chances for ex-prisoners to re-connect with the world they return to, and increased likelihood of associated socio-economic and human problems as a result.



The available evidence suggests that people held in prison have been left behind for many years regarding their access to opportunities for education and learning. If anything, the gap grows further as access to learning resources in prison diminishes and the problems slip further down the political priority list. Reviews commissioned by the UK government (Coates, 2016; Education Select Committee, 2022), have corroborated the importance of making progress in this area.

Education in Prison (1990) is the landmark report published by the Council of Europe. It articulates an ambition to develop 'the whole person' (Costelloe and Warner, 2014), recognising that prison damages people (Warner, 2007, 2018), and that education has the potential to limit this damage.

This is consistent with a report by the United Nation's Human Rights Council which finds that "all persons [in prison] should have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality" (Munoz, 2009: 7-9).

## About the study

The current work began almost a decade ago, with a teaching partnership in 2016 that brought together students from De Montfort University with men serving life sentences of imprisonment. During this period, the project was part of the wider Learning Together network. Research focusing on the 2019 iteration of the eight-week course, explored what mattered most for the university students and the prison learners; evaluative feedback received from both groups of students was extremely positive.

The evaluative research that followed has, to date, produced three inter-related academic articles. A blog article, The Prison Mug, for Sensory Criminology, considers sensory elements of the prison classroom experience.

## Results and conclusions

My research has found that the deployment of moral sight (a sensitivity towards the humanity of all people) and ethical praxis (taking account of important matters for learners) enhanced learners' sense of dignity in a prison classroom comprising university students and men serving long prison sentences (Little, 2023).

This, in turn, enhanced the trustworthiness of the space, helped learners benefit from interaction and prevented moral blindness among prison educators. The research suggests three domains of ethical praxis for enhancing moral sight amongst educators: person-centred praxis; situational praxis; and pedagogical praxis. These may be relevant for other higher learning spaces too, beyond the prison context.

Deploying abstract questions and abstract discussion in the prison classroom space can facilitate the production and exchange of pedagogical capital in a prison classroom (Little and War, 2022).

This helps to resolve a problem that education in prison, at the institutional and policy level, is too often about the use value of qualifications, rather than the exchange value inherent in the experience of learning.

The development of pedagogical capital, a form of symbolic capital related to learning, enhanced the sense of belonging and comfort experienced by students. The pedagogical approach was important for creating a safe, trustworthy, equitable learning space in which students felt sufficiently at ease to exchange their thoughts and ideas as part of group discussion.

Engaging with facilitators and fellow students from beyond the prison walls was found to be beneficial for co-producing a prison classroom space comprising university students, prison learners and university lecturer facilitators.

Incorporating students from outside the prison into the classroom space helped reduce the prison learners' diffidence, the wariness that typically imbues their interactions, particularly those with authority figures.

This also helped to close the pedagogical gap between participants. Enabling interaction that transforms the nature of the space, freeing it

from institutional constraints was also helpful; the relational distance between participating individuals contracted, whilst simultaneously expanding the distance between them and their 'host' institutions.

The approach allowed people to co-produce pedagogical capital, further enabling staff and students to 'see' each other and feel seen. This, together with the use of abstract questions and discussion, facilitated an understanding that knowledge is dispersed within the classroom, and may be disseminated beyond it.

Co-producing an educational space, inside an institution they were studying academically, became an opportunity for university students to experience learning differently to classes on campus. The approach rendered the space trustworthy and safe, in turn allowing the group to participate in potentially uncomfortable conversations, further enhancing learning amongst group participants.

## Recommendations

- ⇒ Promote and protect the right to education in prison, including opportunities for higher-level learning. A shared understanding amongst all in prison (e.g. governors, managers, operational staff and people serving sentences) that people in prison have a right to education and learning in prison, and that this is beneficial for promoting healthy and safe institutions, is fundamentally important.
- ⇒ Create safe spaces for education and learning in prisons. In turn, this supports the creation of healthy prisons. Safe spaces for education and learning are important for enhancing safety in general, and creating healthier prisons in which violence is less likely to flourish.
- ⇒ Solve problems of availability and accessibility of (higher) education opportunities for all people in prison, particularly for those serving long sentences. Problems for people in prison in accessing educational activities appropriate for them is a long-running problem across the prison estate. It is particularly problematic for people serving life sentences; for example, restrictions mean they do not have access to higher level learning opportunities until they are within six years of their release date.
- ⇒ Recognise and promote the value of abstracted questions and discussion to generate interactions in low-trust contexts that enhance the pedagogical capital of learners. Benefits associated with educational interactions promoted by the use of abstract questions and discussion in a prison classroom have been found (Little and Warr, 2022).
- ⇒ Create opportunities for learning that recognise the particular circumstances of people in prison and their humanity, including opportunities to co-produce education and learning courses. A prison classroom co-produced by university students and people in prison enhanced the pedagogical capital of participants, further enabling staff and students to 'see' each other and feel seen. This, together with the use of abstract questions and discussion, facilitated an understanding that knowledge is dispersed within the classroom, and may be disseminated beyond it. There was also evidence of positive effects beyond the classroom space (Little, 2024).
- ⇒ Provide support to staff who would like to enhance their education by engaging in higher-level learning opportunities. Important for promoting the value of education and learning across institutions. There have been low educational entry requirements for prison officers in England and Wales for some years now. This may fuel resentment of staff towards prisoners studying for higher qualifications than they themselves have achieved. Enhancing cultures of education and learning in prison are important (e.g. Bernallick, 2019). Educational requirements for prison staff elsewhere are considerably higher (for example, in Norway).

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