The digital divide
Lessons from prisons abroad

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Introduction

The Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) is a network of organisations and individuals with expertise in prison education. We use our collective voice to improve the quality and outcomes of prison education. The PLA has been advocating for increased use of digital technology in prisons for many years, and at our annual conference in 2018 our members voted for this to be our top priority.

This briefing explores the benefits that increasing access to digital technology would bring to prisoners and the communities they will return to on release, and looks at ten examples of how technology is being used as part of learning in prisons around the world.

Digital technology and exclusion

Digital technology is embedded in our daily lives, and has transformed almost every aspect of public, private and work life. We use the internet to pay rent and bills, to search and apply for jobs, to communicate, watch TV and films, read online articles, and understand the world. For most of us, it is hard to imagine our lives without internet access. However, the reality is that 11.3 million adults in the UK are digitally excluded, lacking either skills, connectivity or accessibility – and this includes our prison population.

Government research shows that it is often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society who face digital exclusion, including older people, people with disabilities, those with lower wages, prisoners and former prisoners.[1]

In a world where digital technology is constantly changing and being updated, spending even a few months – let alone a few years – isolated from these changes can present huge obstacles for prisoners on release

Digital literacy

Digital literacy is the ability to find, evaluate and compose clear information through media and other digital platforms. Digital literacy is essential for prisoner learners and for people leaving prison who face the challenges of finding a new job, a home and support networks.

More and more jobs demand applicants with a level of digital literacy. Former prisoners must be equipped with the skills required to integrate into their communities and contribute to society, particularly in the face of a nationwide skills shortage in technology-related roles. According to the government's strategy on digital inclusion, the rate of reoffending drops significantly when digital skills, training and support are used to complement existing approaches to reducing reoffending.[2]

Education and digital technology

Most education, teaching and learning in the community requires internet and computer access. Around two fifths of adults participate in formal distance learning courses (learning that is intended to lead to a nationally recognised qualification), and nearly two thirds of these are taught online. For most students, including adult learners, typing up papers and submitting them through an online portal is mandatory; students are increasingly expected to produce research which references the most recent articles, many of which are only – or most easily – accessible online. Whilst digital literacy is an end in itself, technology also plays a major part in education more broadly, and can be used to facilitate the teaching of other skills.

Digital technology can help people at all levels of ability, from basic skills up to degree-level learning, by complementing traditional activities and facilitating blended learning. It can also be a gateway for people who have negative associations with traditional classroom environments and may not feel confident stepping into a classroom.

Education in prison can provide people with a sense of purpose whilst coping with prison life; allow them to gain new skills to manage prison life both in prison and after release; and help them to strengthen relationships with people inside and outside prison. It has also been proven to reduce reoffending.[3] However, staff shortages over recent years have frequently led to restricted regimes and inspectors have found that prisoners spend too much time locked up, making attending classes or going to the library impossible. [4]

The Covid lockdown has led to the temporary closure of face-to-face education in prisons. This also means that prisoners are spending up to 23.5 hours each day in their cells, either alone or with a cell-mate, with extremely limited access to educational resources.

In-cell technology, such as tablets with access to a prison intranet or pre-approved websites, educational applications and email systems, would help prisoners to maintain some level of continuity in terms of their education and contact with tutors. It would also provide a meaningful way for prisoners to use their time and help them to prepare for their release.

Digital technology is not a fix-all solution and cannot fully mitigate the impact of being locked up for long periods. It also cannot replace human, face-to-face contact, which is essential for mental health and wellbeing and for the development of communication and other transferrable skills. It can, however, widen access to different courses and qualifications – digital and otherwise. It can help prisoners understand the technology their children are using at school, their families are using in the

supermarket, and the increasingly digitalised world outside. The use of technology can help prisoners maintain stronger family ties and become more involved as parents by, for instance, enabling them to read bedtime stories or help their children with homework.

Access to digital technology in prisons in England and Wales

The Virtual Campus (VC), provided by Meganexus, is effectively a secure intranet system available in classrooms and libraries. Students can use the VC under tutor supervision in all prisons in England and Wales. However, accessing the communal areas where the VC is located can be problematic. The systems are not always up and running and prisoners are not always escorted to the communal locations by prison officers. Sometimes, there are only a few computer terminals holding the VC in each prison. Prison learners can use the VC to access educational resources (including audio-visual materials), to participate in interactive activities and to complete computer-marked assignments. Some Open University courses are available in some prisons, enabling students to access their course materials in a digital format.

The Ministry of Justice has been running a pilot involving prisoners having laptops in cell. This has been running in both HMP Berwyn and HMP Wayland since February 2017.[5] The laptops enable prisoners to manage some of their day-to-day tasks such as checking their applications and buying pin-phone credit. The laptops also give access to prison-related notices, communication and rules, mental health advice and education materials. This platform is monitored daily for usage and through digital feedback from prisoners and staff. An evaluation of the HMP Wayland site has been undertaken by Dr Emma Palmer at the University of Leicester. The evaluation, which is expected to be published soon, found that staff and prisoners viewed the presence of digital technology as an incentive for good behaviour. [6]

In-cell cabling has already been rolled out in the following prisons: Aylesbury, Bristol, Chelmsford, Cookham Wood, Durham, Eastwood Park, Exeter, Guys Marsh, High Down, Holme House, Kirklevington, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Moorland, Nottingham, Swaleside and Wandsworth. Prisons that are already cabled could relatively easily implement in cell- devices for their populations.

Some prisons are piloting the use of in-cell devices for very small numbers of enhanced, security-cleared prisoners. For example, companies such as Socrates and Coracle Inside supply in-cell devices that provide formal education and vocational training. The demand for Socrates and Coracle Inside is growing, but their availability is still dependent on prison's individual authorisation processes and budget. This means that there is a lack of coordination or uniformity in how widely and in what capacity these services are available.

The four main education providers in English prisons – Milton Keynes College, Novus, PeoplePlus and Weston College – have all recognised the need for digital technology in prison education departments. Technology in education departments has been upgraded because the new Prison Education Framework (PEF) contracts, introduced in April 2019, included a requirement to update and refresh all computer equipment used in teaching. Providers are also potentially keen to put their own resources into expanding digital technology, if suitable platforms are authorised by HMPPS.

Currently, access to digital technology to support education is a mixed picture with a handful of different initiatives and projects across the prison estate. More consistency and a standard platform are needed to enable equivalence of access (especially in-cell) across all prisons and provide clarity about the necessary security requirements. The lack of a clear strategy on digital technology means that England and Wales are trailing behind many other countries, as we detail below.

Prisons around the world have found innovative ways of bringing digital technology into prisons, in many cases improving both digital literacy and access to other types of education. In this briefing, we look at how ten prisons around the world are making use of digital technology to deliver education.

1 AUSTRALIA
USQ 'Making the Connection'

Prisoners in Australia can use digital technology to participate in undergraduate degrees and a tertiary preparation pathways programme at the **University of Southern Queensland (USQ)**. Students use an offline remote learning system installed on Dell education series laptops that can be used by prisoners in their cells.

Through trial and error in earlier projects, USQ eliminated fixed computers in common areas (which limited the time prisoners could spend writing assignments, and forced students to compete for access) and also e-readers (whose screens were too small for effective studying). USQ understood that for its prison learners to be able to dedicate the time they needed to studying, they would need access to in-cell technology.

Using laptops means that USQ prisoner learners can spend longer on assignments and fit in studying alongside work, visits and other time out of their cells. Prisoners cannot access the internet through the laptops, so education staff at correctional centres access course materials via a USQ portal and load the educational material onto the laptops for the students.

The project utilised technology effectively, but also innovated in different ways. Prison and university staff met, prison officers and education staff visited USQ's campus, and USQ's academic and administration staff visited prisons. This enabled better relationships to develop and made it possible to iron out issues and overcome barriers. The trust this engendered meant that prison officers could be confident in the security of the technology, and that university staff could understand some of the difficulties prisons might face in facilitating distance learning. Significantly, after these meetings were in place, the progression rate of USQ prison learners increased dramatically.

Each university department – academic and administrative – also provides its services to prisoner learners, and what began as a project is now embedded in the way USQ works.

2 BELGIUM
PrisonCloud

In 2016, Beveren Prison in Antwerp introduced **PrisonCloud**, a secure, in-cell platform comprised of a fixed computer, a monitor, a keyboard and a headset. It allows prisoners to complete e-learning, watch films and TV, and have control over some aspects of prison life such as food, medical appointments and their prison finances (comparable to a personal form of the self-service kiosks which are located in communal areas in prisons in the England and Wales). Certain pre-approved websites can also be accessed and availability of online reading materials and the phone-call function mean that prisoners can communicate and handle any changes or concerns regarding their case.

Feedback from prisoners is positive – prisoners have said that PrisonCloud provides them with meaningful activity and the digital system designed to control some aspects of prison life makes things run more smoothly.[7]

3   CATALONIA
AlfaDigital

Prisons in Catalonia incorporate cultural promotion and understanding within their broader framework of 'Social Education', using digital technology to achieve this.

The **AlfaDigital programme** in Catalonia aims to develop creative abilities and provide cultural stimulation whilst also developing digital skills. It allows for different levels of digital access in different prisons.[8][9]

The most basic level is the use of 'Cyberaules', which are classrooms installed with around ten to fifteen computers allowing prisoners to access a prison intranet. The system enables access to Moodle platforms and an offline version of Wikipedia. Cyberaules are often used in group settings for teaching classes.

In some prisons, 'Omnia Points' allow prisoners to access courses on creating web pages and other digital skills, and creative workshops including radio, video, photography and music production and development. For example, Barcelona Youth Prison Centre developed an audio-visual project using digital photography and radio and music production following workshops in these areas, and produces a blog and YouTube channel.[10]

In classrooms where prisoners can access the internet, there is always a member of staff present, and entry to classrooms is controlled. Access to different webpages is also monitored and controlled through firewalls and navigation and content filters.

4   DENMARK
'Internet Cafés'

Internet access in Denmark varies between open and closed prisons, and also between different open prisons.

In closed prisons, an extremely limited form of internet access is available to students participating in certain educational programmes. It is generally available in classrooms during lessons, and is restricted to a small number of pre-approved websites.

In open prisons, internet access is available on three levels.[11]

The first is available in six of the eight open prisons in Denmark, where prisoners can access 'internet cafés' – communal areas installed with fixed computers. Internet use is surveyed and log-files are created and monitored by prison staff. Unsuitable websites, including social media sites, are blocked. Although in general there are restrictions in the number of times prisoners can access the internet cafés each week, access is part of the standard provision for all prisoners, and there are no restrictions based on prisoner status (such as basic, enhanced, etc). As a result, they allow a significant number of prisoners relatively free internet access, enabling them to participate in educational activities and online learning independently and to use the internet for other purposes including searching for jobs or housing.

The second type is heavily monitored internet access in classrooms which usually does not include emails or communication. In the classroom environment, the internet is mainly used in group settings so is relatively widely accessible, but it is generally used for a specific purpose. Prisoners are not able to do individual work or access the computers for non-educational purposes or for education outside of the prison curriculum.

The third type is awarded to a small number of prisoners for specific educational or work purposes. It allows prisoners to have computers with fairly unrestricted internet access in their cells, often with the ability to send emails.

5 FINLAND
Artificial Intelligence

In Finnish prisons, digital connectivity for communication and learning has been driven by the idea that prison life should resemble that of life outside as much as possible, as well as the rise in proportion of foreign national prisoners, who are often unable to participate in visits. Internet access is under development for uses such as online banking, video calls and education, and is being tested in different ways in prisons across the country.[12] One such example is in **Turku prison**, where prisoners can use laptops and computers in libraries, and have access to pre-approved websites through the internet.

Many of the websites available are educational, and one course that prisoners can access is an Artificial Intelligence course that was developed by the University of Helsinki. The Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency (similar to HMPPS), who decides on which websites can be accessed, primarily saw the course as a way of enabling prisoners to reintegrate into the digital-first employment market upon their release. However, as well as the economic motivations, the decision was also driven by a desire to ensure that no one is left behind in an increasingly digital world. [13] [14]

6 GERMANY
Elis

Prisons in Germany are run by the federal states, meaning that there is not a coordinated or unified approach to education across the whole country. However, eleven out of sixteen of the federal states cooperate and contribute to a central **e-learning platform, Elis**. [15]

Elis enables fifty prisons to connect to a central server that offers learning software packages for about 160 different courses on a wide range of topics. The server is set up so that there is no access to the open internet, though users can visit a selection of pre-approved web addresses, and prisoners can request and be granted access to other websites. Administrators prepare the access for individual students who then enter Elis using IDs and passwords.

Tutors can also tailor communication settings to determine whether each student can communicate with other classmates, only with tutors, or not at all. There is also a moderated forum available where students can submit posts which are monitored by tutors who decide whether they are made visible to other students.

Elis is not used as a stand-alone resource or without tutor guidance and supervision, but as an additional resource within courses, in a group setting and in communal areas, but not in cells. Specifics vary between prisons, but Elis learning is generally carried out in classrooms equipped with computers, with a teacher directing or supervising a group of between six and twelve students.

7 NEW ZEALAND
Virtual Reality

In New Zealand, the University of Otago worked with the charity Methodist Mission Southern to introduce **virtual reality** to prisons to help Otago prisoners with dyslexia and other learning difficulties improve their basic literacy and numeracy.[16]

The virtual reality headset 'transports' prisoners to a street with a garage, where they must read signs and messages to open doors and 'move' through the environment. They then enter a garage and work their way through numeracy and literacy activities. The technology is based on the idea that people with dyslexia and other learning difficulties often learn better through alternatives to traditional 'pen and paper' methods. Virtual reality can be used to create a more interesting and relevant environment and remove some of the negative associations some students may have with classrooms.

8 SWEDEN
A dual approach

In 2000, the Swedish Prison Service adopted a new model of prison education, which aimed to create an education system able to work effectively with Sweden's high rate of transfers of prisoners between prisons, and disparities in size and staffing levels in prisons across the country. This new approach relies heavily on **virtual learning platform NetCentre** to enable distance learning.[17] [18]

Within the new system, prison tutors have a dual role as general support tutors in their own prison, while also acting as tutors of a more specialised subject to a mixed group of prisoners in their own prison and prisoners in other parts of the country, through distance learning. This means prisoners benefit from having two tutors – one for general support for the standard education provision such as numeracy and literacy, and one curriculum expert (who is often but not always remote) for more specialist courses, such as a French language course or a psychology module.

Students and their remote tutors keep in touch through phone calls and NetCentre; rather than an intranet with virtual classrooms where tutors can support and motivate learners as well as send them course notes, materials and assignments. There is also a physical Learning Centre at every prison where the majority of learning takes place, and which provides reading and writing support, basic adult education, university education and vocational training. It is open every day and prisoners can choose to study full-time or fit studying in around work. This approach means that face-to-face learning is not compromised, whilst prisoners are still able to undertake more specific courses with specialised support. It also enables a much greater variety in the education programmes available to each individual, and around 140 courses are currently available in prisons in Sweden.

Because education is focused on the individual and is largely conducted remotely, there are no term times or minimum group sizes. This means students can have an individual learning plan to study at their own pace. They can start a course at any point, and are also able to receive support from the same 'virtual tutor' until the course is completed, even if they are moved to a different prison. This is a highly effective way to address some of the issues specific to countries such as England and Wales, where the rate of transfers between prisons is high and learning is likely to be disrupted by moving prisons.

9 USA WISCONSIN
RACHEL

RACHEL (Remote Area Community Hotspot for Education & Learning) is a digital library that holds a closed set of educational content without being connected to the internet.[19]
It stores books, films and copies of educational websites such as Khan Academy, Ted Talks, Wikipedia and interactive learning pages, using an interface that gives the appearance of being connected to the internet. The central device emits a wireless signal that up to fifty devices including tablets, desktop computers or laptops can connect to. Devices can then be used by independent learners or by tutors in prisons to facilitate learning and to find and display reference materials.

In most prisons where RACHEL is used it is installed in libraries or classrooms. However, in others, such as Oregon Youth Authority, some RACHELs are wired into living units for independent use, and others are taken out to vocational training centres with tablets that are then used to display training materials. The devices can be updated to hold specific or bespoke content, access to which can then be granted to specific students; in Oregon, they contain content from the local college.

10 USA
The Last Mile

Similar to Code4000[20], **The Last Mile (TLM)** is a not-for-profit organisation that runs offline coding programmes in prisons in California, Indiana, Kansas and Oklahoma. It teaches different technological and digital communication skills and focuses on the employment options and opportunities for participants upon their release. TLM focuses on its employment work through projects such as **TLM Works** and **The Next Chapter**

The Last Mile Works is a web development shop inside San Quentin prison that employs prisoners who are graduates of a partnership between TLM and the California Industry Prison Authority to develop bespoke software solutions for clients.

Accessing the internet is illegal in US prisons, but prisoners at San Quentin constructed an infrastructure hosted on the prison's local server to simulate the internet. This means prisoners can begin to learn how the internet works without having access to it.

The Next Chapter is an apprenticeship programme which trains and mentors graduates from The Last Mile, providing them with employment upon release and other resettlement support. One of the participating employers, Slack, said that it recognised that there is an increasing skills shortage in coding, a skill that can be learnt by anyone who is hardworking and has lots of time, making it well suited to learners in prison.[21]
The programme also provides housing, financial literacy and other workplace culture support to its apprentices when they are released from prison to try to avoid issues interfering with participants' ability to continue and complete the apprenticeship.[22]

Conclusion

Projects in other countries demonstrate that it is possible to provide safe, secure, restricted intranet and internet access to prisoners. Increasing digital literacy and digital access for prisoners is essential and the prison service is failing prisoners and the communities they will be returning to if it does not provide these opportunities. The 2020 Covid-19 lockdown has highlighted the unsustainability of current provision. HMPPS must act now to ensure that prisoners get access to the skills and technology they need.

> 'It is possible to provide safe, secure, restricted, intranet and internet, access to prisoners. Increasing digital literacy and digital access for prisoners is essential.'

Recommendations

- HMPPS should develop and implement a national strategy to ensure that there is a single consistent secure infrastructure for connecting devices and making apps available for learners of all abilities to access educational content.

- This should be appropriately resourced and the security guidance must be clear, so that Governors are empowered to roll this out in their establishments.

- Where possible, the education platform should support wider functionality linked to the prison intranet, so that prisoners can access information on their prison account and make applications. This could also support health and resettlement functions. This will realise significant savings in staff time and support the business case for the platform.

- In-cell devices must become the norm and an automatic entitlement that is removed only in exceptional circumstances.

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Prisoner Learning Alliance

The Prisoner Learning Alliance is a network of organisations and individuals with expertise in prison education. We use our collective voice to improve prison education.

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